Rolling Stone
INDIA
DECEMBER 2023
ISSUE 192

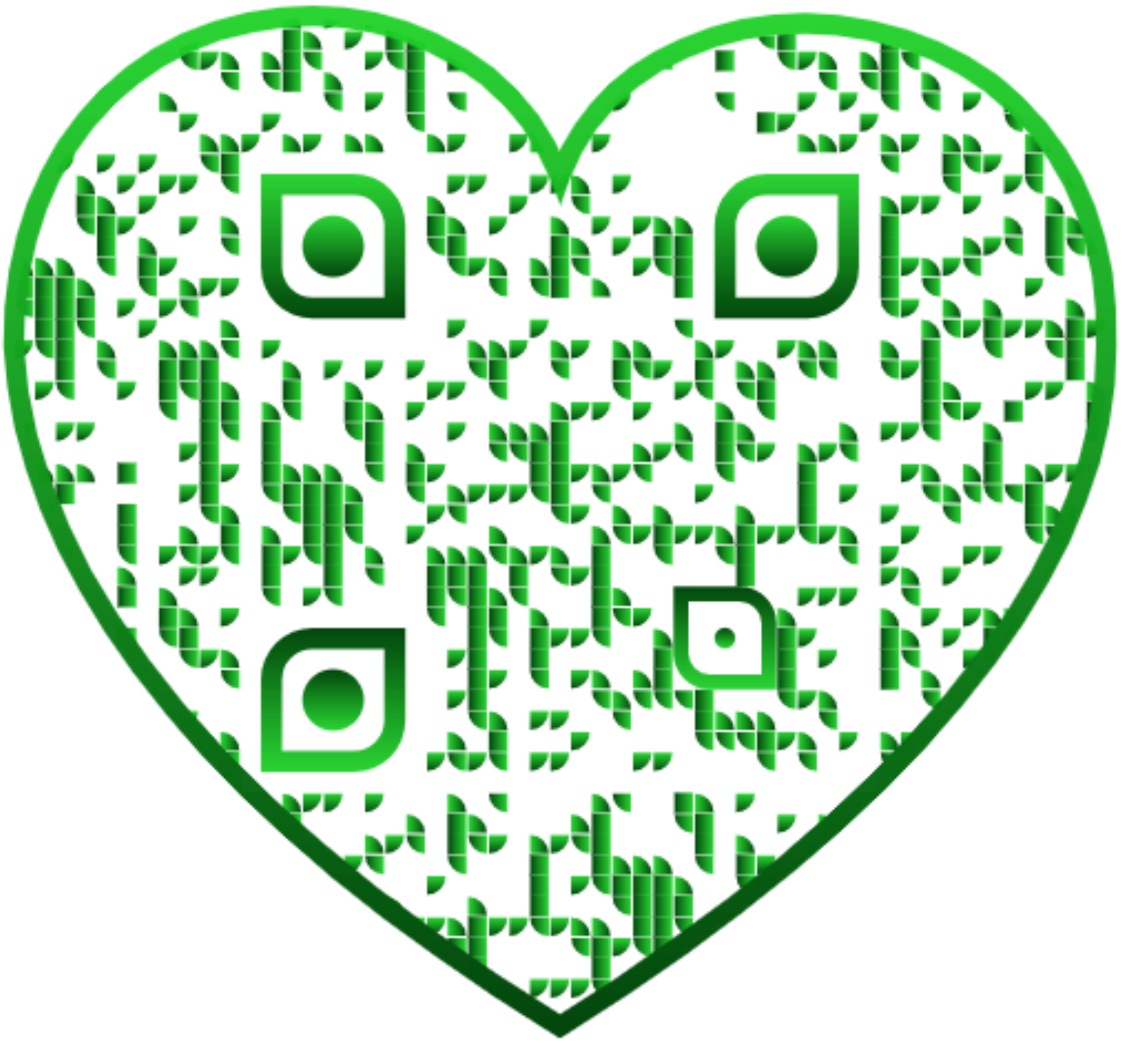
DJ KHALED CAN'T STOP WINNING

Up close with the most relentlessly inspiring man in music

SEARCHING FOR THE REAL LIL TAY

THE CRYPTO WHISTLEBLOWER

PLUS
OLIVER ANTHONY
SLEATER-KINNEY
BRENT FAIYAZ



Contents

RS INDIA

ISSUE 192
'ALL THE NEWS THAT FITS'

30

DJ Khaled Can't Stop Winning

At home, on the golf course, and into a new phase with the most inspiring man in music

By Jeff Ihaza

28

Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy: 'We Just Feel Blessed That in One Lifetime We Could Create a Good Body Of Work'

The Mumbai-based music composer trio worked on six tracks for the Zoya Akhtar film 'The Archies'

By David Britto

GETTY IMAGES

Contents

The Mix

11 **Sandunes Returns with Immersive New Album 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet'**
The 13-track record also includes a host of collaborators

12 **Meiyang Chang on the Harsh Truths Reality TV and the Music Industry Have To Face**
The actor, singer and host recently released a gentle, melancholy ballad called "Jhoothi Chai" as part of an upcoming EP 'Returning'

14 **FuzzCulture's New 'Violent Delights' EP Is a Bold Artistic Leap**
The four-track record includes raw synths, minimal beats and unapologetic eccentricities

17 **Snarky Puppy Hit All the Right Notes at Mumbai Gig**
The American jazz fusion band were back performing in India after nearly a decade

ON THE COVER

Photograph by **Devin Christopher**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Rolling Stone INDIA

CREATIVELAND PUBLISHING PVT. LTD.

Sajan Raj Kurup
CHAIRMAN

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & PUBLISHER — Radhakrishnan Nair
SENIOR EDITOR — Peony Hirwani
ASSISTANT EDITOR — Anurag Tagat
ASSISTANT EDITOR — Riddhi Chakraborty
SENIOR WRITER — David Britto
SENIOR WRITER — Debashree Dutta
STAFF WRITER — Divyansha Dongre

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS — Sunil Sampat, Soleil Nathwani

ART DIRECTOR — Tanvi Shah
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR — Hemali Limbachiya
ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR — Nandkishor Sawant

FASHION EDITOR — Neelangana Vasudeva

PRODUCTION MANAGER — Mangesh Salvi

SENIOR DIGITAL MANAGER — Jayesh V. Salvi

ADVERTISING & SALES

BRAND DIRECTOR — Tulsi Bavishi
MUMBAI tulsi@mansworldindia.com

DEPUTY GENERAL MANAGER — Noha Qadri
MUMBAI noha@mansworldindia.com

GENERAL MANAGER — Manoj Sharma
DELHI manoj@mansworldindia.com

SR. CIRCULATION EXC. (MIS & OPR) — Santosh P. Gajinkar
9969571319

CONTACT:

E-MAIL: editor@rollingstone-india.com,
circulation@rollingstone-india.com

Copyright © 2019 by ROLLING STONE LLC.
All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or
in part without permission is prohibited.
The name ROLLING STONE and the logo thereof are
registered trademarks of ROLLING STONE LLC,
whose trademarks have been licensed to
Creativeland Publishing Pvt Ltd.

Published by Creativeland Publishing Pvt Ltd,
Correspondence address: 6th Floor, Shivraj Heights,
Corner of 14th Road, &, Off Linking Rd,
Khar West, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400052

www.rollingstoneindia.com

ROLLING STONE HEADQUARTERS

Gus Wenner
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

EDITOR IN CHIEF — Noah Shachtman
DIGITAL DIRECTOR — Lisa Tozzi
CREATIVE DIRECTOR — Joseph Hutchinson
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY & DEPUTY CREATIVE DIRECTOR — Emma Reeves
PUBLISHER, EVP, HEAD OF GLOBAL BRAND PARTNERSHIPS — Brian Szejka
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER — Jessica Grill

PENSKE MEDIA CORPORATION (PMC)

Jay Penske
CHAIRMAN AND CEO

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER — George Grobar
MANAGING DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL MARKETS — Debashish Ghosh
ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL MARKETS — Gurjeet Chima
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, INTERNATIONAL BRAND & PARTNERSHIP OPERATIONS — Francesca Lawrence
MANAGER, INTERNATIONAL BRAND PARTNERSHIPS — Emma Wagner

Jann S. Wenner
FOUNDER AND EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

NEW YORK OFFICE

475 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10017
212.213.1900

LOS ANGELES OFFICE

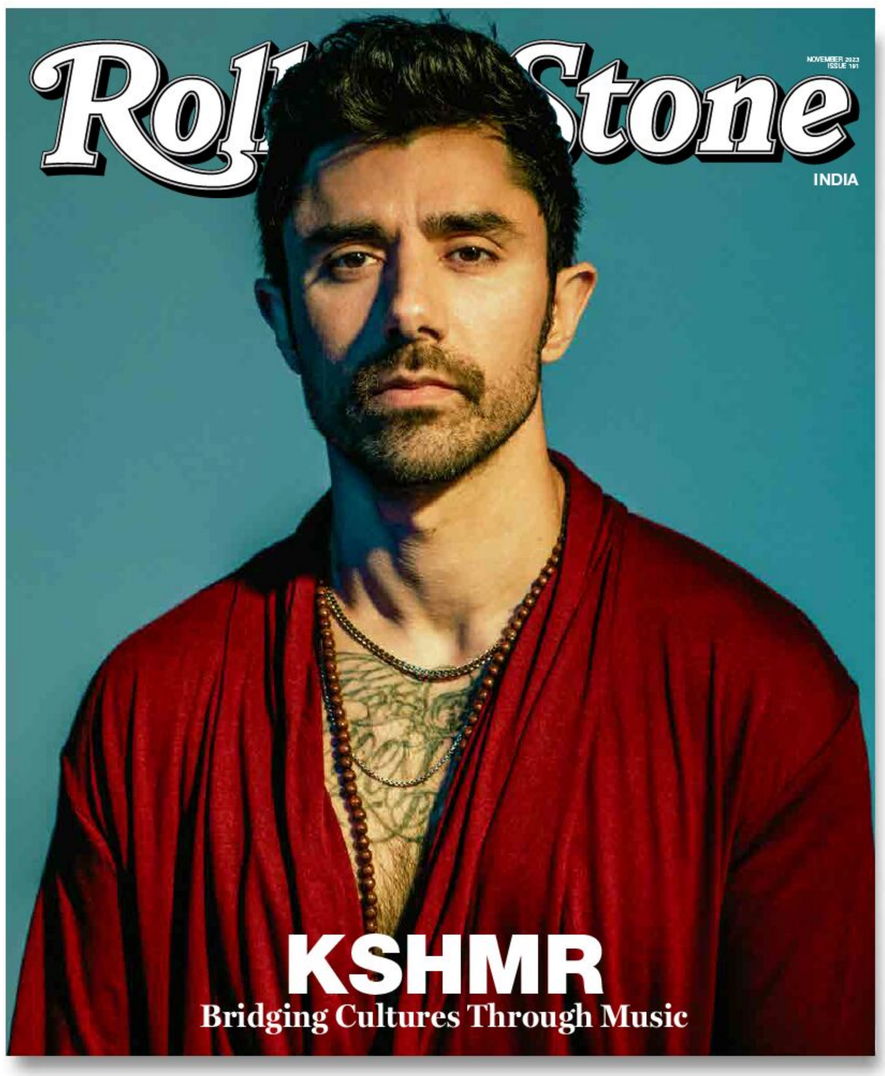
11175 Santa Monica Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90025
310.321.5000

ROLLING STONE (ISSN 0035-791x)
is published 12 times per year, which is subject to change at any time, by
Penske Media Corporation, LLC, 475 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10017.
Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices.
Postmaster: Send address changes to ROLLING STONE Customer Service,
P.O. Box 37505, Boone, IA 50037-0505. Canadian Postmaster:
Send address changes and returns to P.O. Box 63, Malton CFC, Mississauga,
Ontario L4T3B5. Canada Poste publication agreement #40683192. International
Publications Mail Sales Product Agreement No. 450553.

The entire contents
of ROLLING STONE are copyright © 2022 by ROLLING STONE LLC, and may
not be reproduced in any manner, either in whole or in part, without written
permission. All rights are reserved.

Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

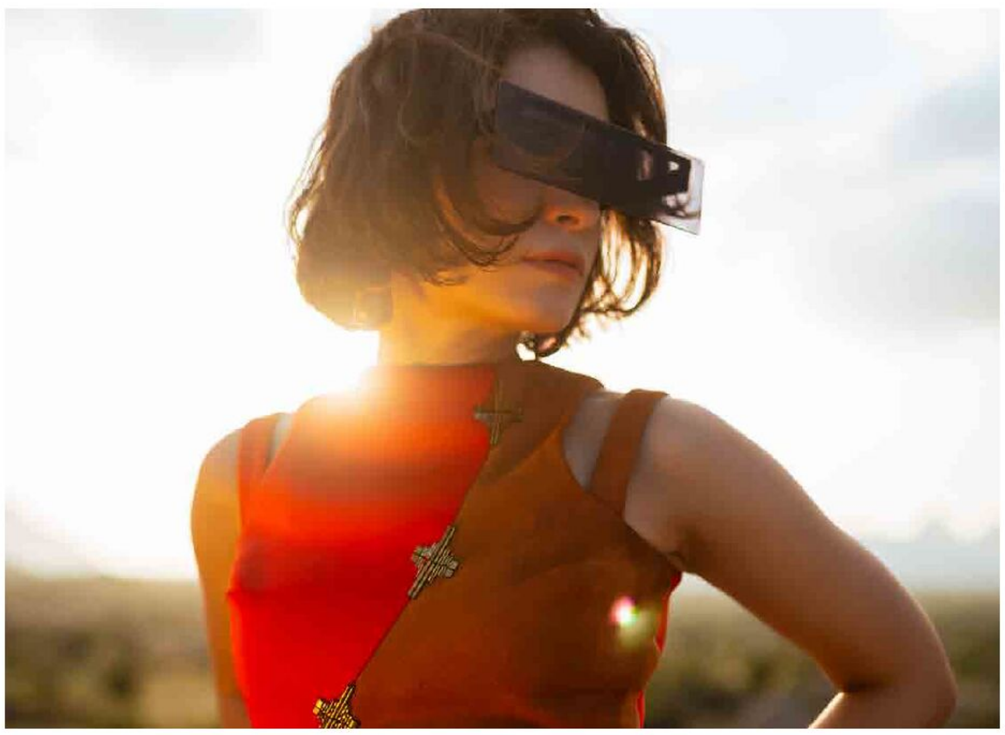


"His [KSHMR's] ability to transcend boundaries and infuse purpose into his work is truly commendable."

— Sunil Solanki

KSHMR Crafts Melodies with Purpose

The cover story on KSHMR is a testament to his impact on music, inspiring a generation with melodies and meaning. His ability to transcend boundaries and infuse purpose into his work is truly commendable. The article captures the essence of an artist shaping the musical landscape.



SPOTLIGHT

Mali Provides a Daring Visual Triumph

Mali's "Semi-Automatic Butane" video is a visual triumph. The electrifying fusion of music and captivating visuals showcases Mali's artistic fearlessness. The video's edgy aesthetics and unique style deserve applause, elevating the song to an unforgettable audio-visual experience.

- Sean Pereira

antiSOCIAL Is a Pioneering Haven for Emerging Artists

The article on how antiSOCIAL has nurtured young artists is inspiring. It highlights the venue's vital role in fostering emerging talent, providing a crucial platform for artistic expression. AntiSOCIAL's commitment to supporting the next generation of artists is commendable and deserves recognition.

- Parvathi Gattani

Jacob Collier's Musical Odyssey

The feature on Jacob Collier's India tour and the insights into his 'Djesse Vol. 4' album is captivating. Collier's musical prowess and the anticipation for his India tour add a vibrant chapter to the country's music scene. The article beautifully captures the essence of his innovative artistry.

- Adil Kale

CONTACT US

LETTERS: ROLLING STONE INDIA,
6th Floor, Shivraj Heights,
Corner of 14th Road, &, Off Linking Rd,
Khar West, Mumbai, Maharashtra 400052
E-MAIL: editor@rollingstone-india.com
Letters/e-mails will be edited for brevity.
SUBSCRIBER SERVICES:
circulation@rollingstone-india.com,
9969571319

RollingStoneIndia RollingStoneIn

Opening Act

Sampha's Cosmic Transmissions

DURING HIS SATELLITE BUSINESS residencies this year, Sampha played in a circle of musicians, with different voices, synths, drums, and electronics vying gracefully for center stage. The shows required smaller venues, like St. John at Hackney Church in London, where he performed three nights in October ahead of the release of his new album, *Lahai*. "It looked beautiful in there, and aesthetically just felt like the right kind of place to have it," Sampha says. He describes his new album as "thinking a lot about time, and divinity, and infinity, and connection." As circles became a motif in his songwriting for this project, the idea of Satellite Business was born. "Playing in the round created this intimate, almost ethereal atmosphere," he says. "They were quite special shows. I definitely felt a lot of love from the crowd." JEFF IHAZA

Sampha and his crew before the church show in London

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHA

The Fire Inside Sleater-Kinney

After a shocking tragedy, the punk band found a new level of intensity in its music

HAIR BY DENNIS GOTS WITH FORWARD ARTISTS.
MAKEUP BY ROB RUMSEY AT A-FRAME AGENCY.

PHOTOGRAPH BY Zhamak Fullad

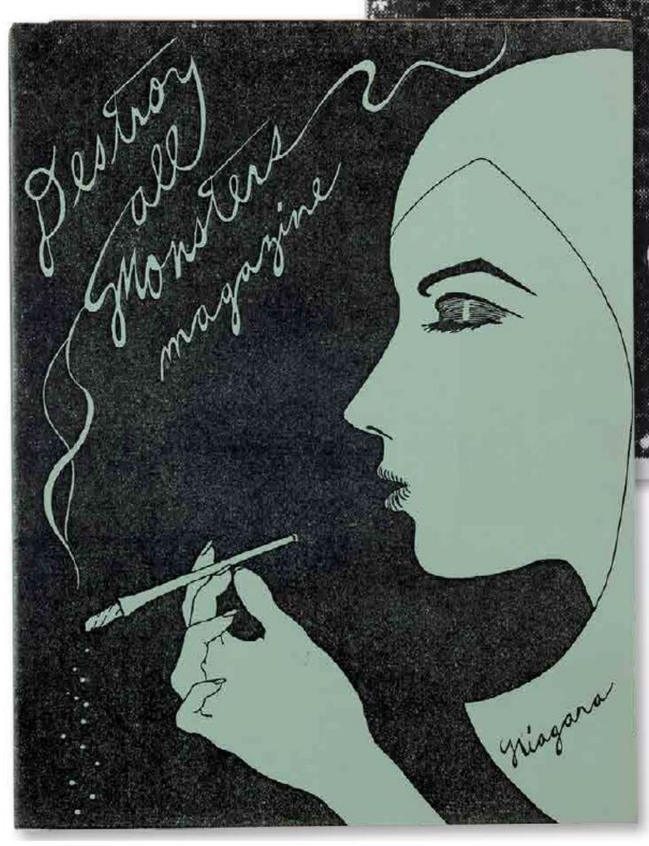
EXHIBIT

The History and Future of the Zine Revolution

think about the most revolutionary inventions of all time. Is the photocopier on your list? Starting as far back as the 1930s, when sci-fi readers and comic-book buffs used DIY newsletters to connect with their fellow fans, the zine movement took off in the decades that followed, becoming a powerful voice for marginalized communities and subcultures of all kinds. That evolution is captured in the new Brooklyn Museum exhibit "Copy Machine Manifestos: Artists Who Make Zines," the first North American show dedicated to the zine art form. Encompassing more than 800 publications and art pieces, the exhibit stretches from the Seventies punk explosion to the interconnected queer and feminist underground movements of the Eighties, Nineties, and 2000s, all the way up to the zine's current place in popular culture. Curated by Branden W. Joseph, professor of modern and contemporary art at Columbia University, and Drew Sawyer, the museum's curator of photography, the show features items from Canada, the U.S., and Mexico.

"A central part [of zine culture] is the control and production of one's own media," Sawyer explains. "It's about [people] participating in creating their own culture." BRENNA EHRLICH

"Copy Machine Manifestos" is open through March 2024 at the Brooklyn Museum.



◀ DESTROY ALL MONSTERS
Born from a Seventies Detroit art collective and noise-rock band by the same name, this zine was largely created by member Cary Loren. It also includes art from fellow members Jim Shaw and Mike Kelley (who'd go on to a noted career in fine art). "It's very multifaceted," Joseph says.

▲ MY COMRADE
Published in 1987 by drag queen and historian Linda Simpson, this gay-nightlife zine features painter and drag performer Tabboo! on the cover. "It takes on this radical stance," says Sawyer, who notes that *My Comrade* helped document the New York scene during the worst years of the AIDS crisis.

→ SLEATER-KINNEY

"I honestly just needed to hear Corin sing." Carrie Brownstein was headed into a studio in Los Angeles last fall when her friend and longtime Sleater-Kinney bandmate Corin Tucker called to give her the name and number of someone at the U.S. Embassy in Italy. The embassy had been urgently trying to contact Brownstein and her sister for a few days, but neither had current phone numbers attached to their passports, and since Tucker is listed as Brownstein's emergency contact, the embassy got ahold of her. Tucker suspected some kind of scam or prank, but just in case it wasn't, she made the call.

Brownstein gave her sister the info and headed in to work. About two hours later, when she took a break, she saw a missed call from her sister. When she phoned back, she received devastating news: Their mother and stepfather had been killed in a car crash four days earlier while vacationing in Italy.

Brownstein and Tucker had been working on a new Sleater-Kinney album before the accident; many of the songs had been written. But the sudden, shocking tragedy shook up the pair's usual process, where they'd share vocal responsibilities. "I felt like I needed to play guitar," Brownstein says. "I didn't really have the strength to sing."

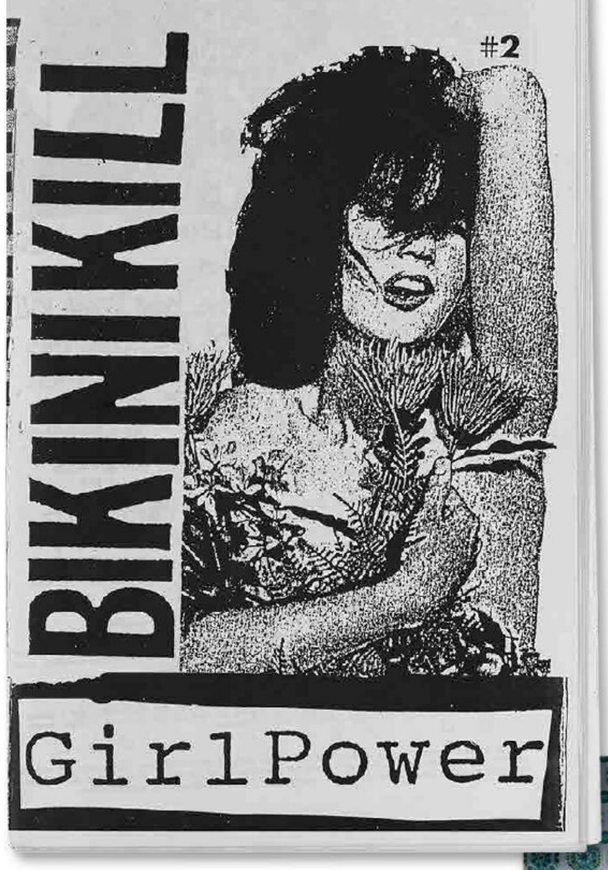
A year later, Brownstein and Tucker are telling the story of *Little Rope,* the band's 11th album, over Zoom. It is a late-autumn afternoon in Portland, Oregon, and they are each in their own homes, with dogs snoozing just off-camera. "The whole tone of the album changed when the accident happened," Tucker says. "It was a real experience of loss. And I think that touched all of the songs."

Navigating loneliness and grief, and the vulnerability that comes from realizing how much you need the people you love, are familiar to anyone who's lived through the past three-plus

FAST FACTS

HOWL Producer John Congleton urged Tucker to unleash her most intense vocals: "I was like, 'Just fucking go for it.'"

ON THE RADAR Some of Tucker's and Brownstein's current faves: Rosalía, Palehound, Blondshell, and Olivia Rodrigo.



▶ BIKINI KILL

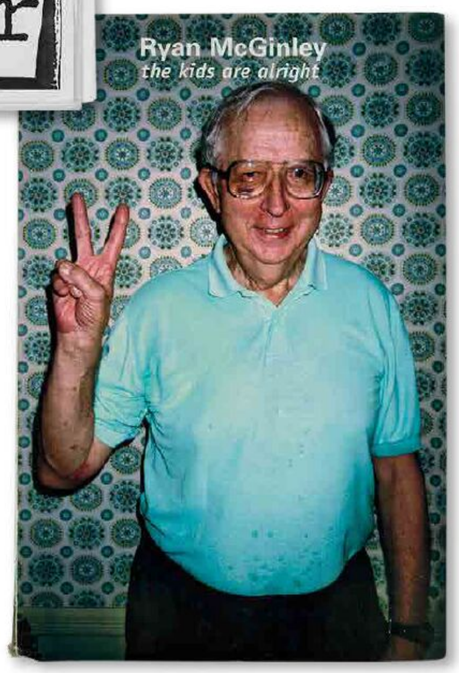
This 1991 zine from the iconic riot-grrrl band is perhaps the most recognizable in the exhibit. Joseph draws attention to the ways that film and video were part of this moment: "It becomes a video exhibition very strongly in that section."

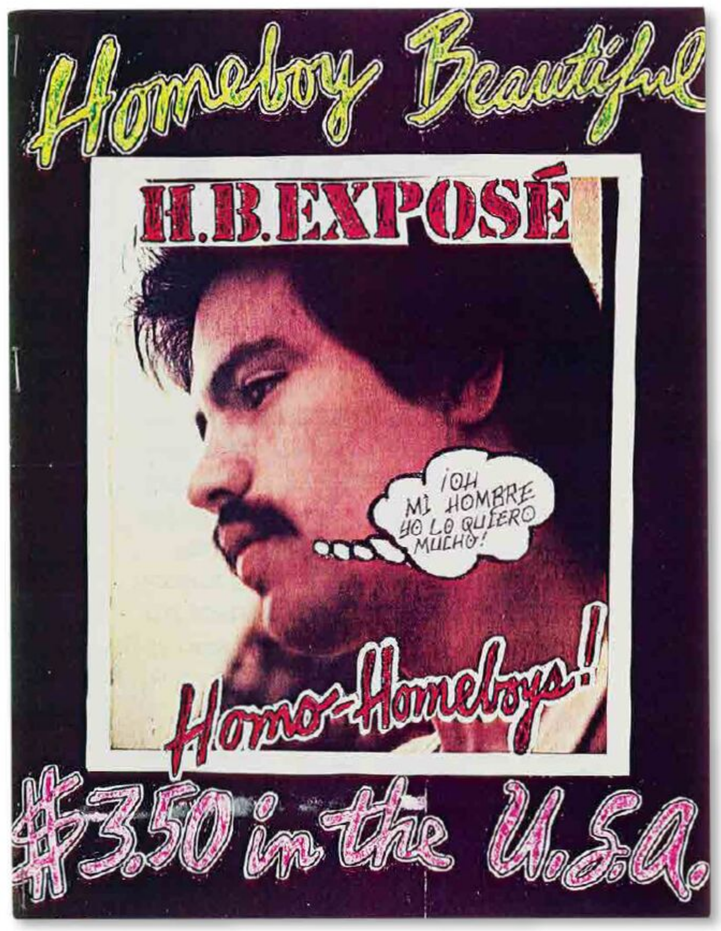
▼ THING

Writer Robert Ford's zine celebrated queer Black culture through interviews with musicians and drag performers, and photography by Lyle Ashton Harris. "It prioritized queer Black cultural production," Sawyer says, pointing out the name of artist and writer Vaginal Davis on the cover.

▼ THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

A prime example of the photo zine, this publication was founded by Ryan McGinley in the late Nineties to document skate culture, graffiti, and youthful abandon. McGinley went on to be one of the youngest people to have a solo exhibit at the Whitney in New York.





▲ HOMEBOY BEAUTIFUL

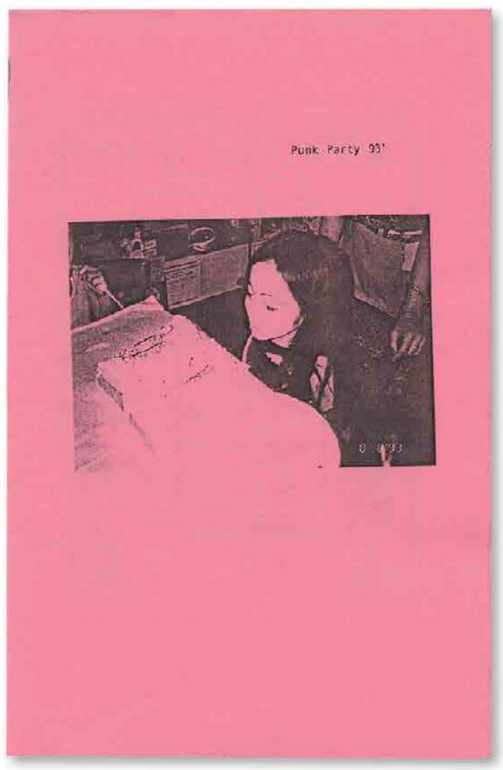
Created by L.A. artist Joey Terrill in 1978, this zine draws on the movements for gay liberation and Chicano rights. Sawyer notes the zine's inclusions of "fotonovelas, which stage these hilarious scenes between all-male cholo groups who end up having crushes on each other."

▲ J.D.S

"This was really a response to the straightness of punk culture," Joseph says of this zine, edited by Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones.

▶ PUNK PARTY ZINE '93

This relatively new zine was published in 2020 by artist Maggie Lee, whose work explores her identity as a first-generation Asian American.



years. Those messy feelings forged *Little Rope,* animating choices from a twist of melody to a reworking of an already-written song. But it's far from a bummer of an album. There's an excitement and an urgency.

Sleater-Kinney have always been one of the most ferocious bands in rock: pounding lyrics sharp and strong, demanding respect, and wrapping together the personal and political. Tucker's impassioned wail and Brownstein's wild shredding inspired a passionate fandom, especially among women who felt they had a rock band that was really speaking to them.

Brownstein and Tucker put out seven albums in 10 years before going on hiatus in 2006. The band's second act — which has now lasted almost as many years as its first one — began in 2015 with the triumphant LP *No Cities to Love*. But this new era has also marked big changes: Drummer Janet Weiss, who'd been with the band since 1997, left in 2019, saying her role in Sleater-Kinney had shifted and she "didn't fit" anymore.

"I felt like I needed to play guitar," Brownstein says. "I didn't really have the strength to sing."

Though there were some hurt feelings at the time, the three women have stayed in touch. "We text on birthdays," Brownstein says. "It's like family. I think that is a dynamic that transcends band changes."

After nearly three decades together, Tucker and Brownstein could probably finish each other's sentences — but they don't, and you get the feeling it's because they genuinely enjoy hearing each other talk. This creative partnership has been hard-fought, and they are fiercely protective of it.

Brownstein and Tucker — 49 and 51 years old, respectively — say they are inspired by artists like Lucinda Williams, 70. "I mean, I think we want to keep going," says Tucker.

"This album, to me, signals the next era of Sleater-Kinney," Brownstein says. "It feels like a reclamation of all that I love about playing music with Corin. And so, I'm going to be very careful with that and try to enjoy it, because you don't know when it could end." LISA TOZZI

Sandunes Returns with Immersive New Album 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet'

The 13-track record also includes a host of collaborators

TWO YEARS on from releasing her 2021 four-track EP *Nowhere to Stand*, Mumbai-bred producer Sanaya Ardeshir aka Sandunes is now back with a splendid new 13-track album entitled *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, out via British label Tru Thoughts. Ahead of performances at Rajasthan's Magnetic Fields Festival and Mumbai's NMACC later this month, we caught up with Ardeshir to discuss the new record, how it came together, what she's got planned going forward and more. Read below.

It's been two years since we last spoke to you, what's been going on in your career since then?
That's right! Working backwards – *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* has been in progress for the last couple of years. Earlier this year, Ears to the Ground – my project with [bassist] Krishna Jhaveri around changing soundscapes as a result of climate change had its first performance in quadraphonic sound with audio-reactive visuals, featuring a lot of recordings from the Western Ghats, and experimental feedback and synthesis.

Prior to that, I worked on the India in Fashion exhibit as part of the launch of Mumbai's NMACC – which was a large project entailing composing and spatializing music for 15 'rooms' as part of a sort of pop-up museum focusing on India's contribution to the world of fashion.

Even earlier, I went on tour with a large band – late last year. We called it the Toxic Positivity Tour, had Krishna Jhaveri [and artists] Josh Fernandes (aka JBABE), Aditya Ashok, and Mali on stage with me. We took new and old music to clubs in Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad and New Delhi with Sourya Sen on live visuals. It was really special and brought performance back into the orbit of my creative practice.

When did work on *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* begin?
It began in late 2020, with early experiments in songwriting from a mobile studio in Kodaikanal.

What can you tell me about the recording and production process for this record?
The approach overall has been really eclectic – in that, the album has been recorded and produced in Kodaikanal, Goa, Mumbai, Oakland, and Berlin, with remote recordings from my collaborators in Upstate New York, London, Bogota, La Paz, Java, and Brasilia.

It's definitely a work that was conceived of in the pandemic – but came to life alongside the re-emergence of 'IRL' life and in-person studio practice – I feel the music reflects that too, in its diversity and the contrasting bits.

Coming to the songs themselves, what do they mean to you and what do you hope listeners take away from them?
I think music means different things to different people. I'm just hopeful that it touches people, moves their soul, reaches their spirit.

The songs have meant various things to me, often revealing epiphanies at various stages of their development, if I could encapsulate it into one feeling – which is hard because there are several dovetailing themes I keep referencing in the record – I would hope it inspires some shape of hope.

You've got a few collaborators on this album too – what was it like having them on board?
The record is in large part about centering the collective. I feel very blessed to be sharing space with these collaborators on the record. Both in terms of intention and process, each was a very special, unique experience.

What's next for you?
Heading to Kanha National Park in Central India for a second installment of Ears to the Ground. Producing music for a few other artists, working on my own next record, and exploring new technology to expand the shape of my performance practice. **DAVID BRITTO**

SUMAIYA SAYED

Meiyang Chang on the Harsh Truths Reality TV and the Music Industry Have To Face

The actor, singer and host recently released a gentle, melancholy ballad called "Jhoothi Chai" as part of an upcoming EP 'Returning'

MORE THAN 15 years ago, Meiyang Chang became a household of sorts when he was part of singing competition *Indian Idol*. Since then, the show and music have remained an inseparable part of his identity, even as he moved into other T.V. gigs including hosting and competing in (separately, of course) reality shows as well as anchoring live telecasts and acting in Bollywood films like *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy*! and Salman Khan-starring blockbusters like *Sultan* and *Bharat*.

The whole time, singing has always been a part of Chang's focus, even if it's mostly his take on popular Indian film and pop songs as part of his series #SingChang. There have been singles and collaborations like "Hanju" with Tony Kakkar and Neha Kakkar,

plus his recent singles "Safarnama" from 2021 and "Mujhe Tum Nazar Se" earlier this year, all of which prove that Chang still values not just his vocal ability but also a deeper appreciation for music. In September, he released his heartbreak song "Jhoothi Chai," with lyrics by Manan Bhardwaj and music produced by Rajat Kumar via Namyoho Studios. Eschewing the high-energy dramatic proclamations of love or an intense tear-jerker tale of woe, Chang instead makes a comforting, reflective romantic song that flows in a fairly mature way. "Jhoothi Chai" is part of an upcoming EP called *Returning*, coming up in 2024.

In an email interview with R*olling Stone India*, Chang looks back at the journey since *Indian Idol* in 2007, the state of reality T.V. and the music industry in India, his latest song and what's next. Excerpts:

Rolling Stone India: It's been about 16 years since you were part of *Indian Idol* and it's an inseparable part of your identity. Did you feel it would be this inseparable once you began moving up into the finalists of the show back then?

Meiyang Chang: Who would have thought? I had completed dental college and wanted to keep singing too, but never in my wildest dreams had I imagined that I would do so on national television. Music has been a constant companion, an ally, even an escape route, and it's providence that it would turn my world around. Reality talent hunts were a novelty back then, especially with someone like me of Indo-Chinese lineage, distinct features and singing in chaste *Hindustani*. I took my chances and even though I've evolved to acting, hosting and more since then, it warms my heart to still be associated with an identity so fondly. The oldies give me their blessings, treating me like one of their own. And the youngsters tell me how they were mere kids when they first saw me on TV. It makes for heartwarming conversations.

What has it been like keeping music as your focus even as your other talents draw you out – like hosting, acting and more?

I'm constantly humming in my daily life, or belting numbers on stage. I won't lie though; I love facing the camera and that aspect of my work often takes me away from *riyaaz*. The vocal load also increases on shoot. On such days, I strike a balance by practicing in the spare time between shoots or takes, learning new songs or revisiting old ones on a regular basis and knowing when to rest my vocal cords.

I constantly assess myself and get feedback from those whose opinion I value. Music is never too far away, with the company of talented musician friends and the privilege to be able to listen and learn from good music and teachers. I'm a composite of all that I do, so it's a perennial game of musical chairs (excuse the pun) between singing, hosting, acting and more. But whenever I'm focused on any one aspect, I'm all in and all there. I do need to make more music, though.

I constantly assess myself and get feedback from those whose opinion I value.

How did "Jhoothi Chai" come about? What did you want to do differently on this track?

The seeds of "Jhoothi Chai" were sown by heartbreak. But rather than mope on what could have been, I wanted to focus on the lovely things that were. What started as a single became the first release of an EP. For this particular song, we kept the melody fairly simple and it was a conscious choice to incorporate conversational small-town lyrics for an old world intimacy between lovers who are no longer together but have fond memories of each other. "Jhoothi Chai"is not about grand gestures, but rather the little things. In the same vein, even though I experimented with the vocal texture and scale, the plan was to keep it easygoing and comforting, like a hot cup of tea. I'm so happy the song has resonated with so many. People especially relate with the *chai-biscuit* analogy. So simple, yet so profound.

Over the years of being part of the music industry and seeing changes, what do you think needs to be respected more by the stakeholders of this industry when it comes to an artist's needs?

Numbers and algorithms have become such an integral part of music-making today that somewhere we're all working to serve that rather than create music. I hold a neutral stance on this, where I believe that commerce and creativity must reach a mutually beneficial middle ground without compromising on quality.

There is a lack of clarity about what actually works and what doesn't, and how one sustains themselves making music. I had an interesting conversation with a head-honcho who laid bare the challenges of making a song work, even with the infrastructure and budgets behind them. Stakeholders need to educate, groom and nurture themselves as well as the artists so that they can grow creatively as well as financially and socially. Honesty, encouragement and management of expectations are paramount. I see some of this being curated of late and that's an encouraging sign. Is it really helping? Time will tell.

As someone who's been on both sides of the stage as competitor and later host in a few reality shows, how has reality TV evolved in India?

From what little I've watched in the last few years, the quality of talent has seen an upsurge. The shows look better than ever and everyone seems at ease, confident and raring to go. But at the core of it, something has stagnated. When I started off, reality TV was in its infancy, everything was new and there was raw enthusiasm to experiment and audiences lapped it up. Almost two decades later, no one has reinvented the wheel.

Barring perhaps a *Rising Star* (first Indian entertainment show to be telecast live, which I also hosted) or *Hustle* (showcasing a new, energetic genre), I haven't seen many major swings at doing something new. Reality TV has also become very predictable and overtly scripted, and I can say this as an occasional party to the crime myself. I'm sure there are a thousand crazy new ideas floating about out there. Someone just needs to take a chance and go for it!

We know the thriller movie *Ulajh* coming up soon. What can we expect from your role in that project?

I'm kicked about *Ulajh*, even though I can't say much about this patriotic thriller at the moment without giving away spoilers. I'm glad Sudhanshu [Saria, director] convinced me to do this role. He's a lovely, passionate man who helped me unlearn a few things, let me flex my wares and play against type while exploring the intriguing world of the Indian Foreign Services. Add Janhvi [Kapoor]'s gung-ho energy and Gulshan [Devaiah] and Roshan [Mathew]'s silken acting chops to that, and we've had a good time filming this. I'm keen to see how it turns out!

What else is coming up in 2024 for you?

More music releases, definitely. And some acting projects too which are under discussion, fingers crossed. Behind the microphone and in front of the camera; those will remain my sweet spots going into 2024 as well.

ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

FuzzCulture's New 'Violent Delights' EP Is a Bold Artistic Leap

The four-track record includes raw synths, minimal beats and unapologetic eccentricities

New Delhi/Mumbai electro-rocker FuzzCulture, the brainchild of artist Arsh Sharma, unleashes his latest sonic masterpiece *Violent Delights*. This four-track EP not only marks a pivotal moment in FuzzCulture's artistic journey but also signifies a bold step into uncharted territories, with Sharma personally taking the reins in directing and animating all accompanying music videos.

Violent Delights follows in the footsteps of its predecessor, 2021's five-track EP *Strange Cities*. However, the new EP embraces a more intimate and unfiltered approach to FuzzCulture's songwriting. The synths resonate with rawness, the drums maintain a minimalist presence, and the bass takes command, creating a sonic landscape that reflects the ever-evolving essence of FuzzCulture.

The lyrical narrative of *Violent Delights* spans a spectrum of themes, from self-actualization to the impact of modern technology. "Bots Attack !" delves into the imminent threat of an AI apocalypse, "Fidget Spinners" tackles the concerning issue of children developing ADHD from an overload of digital content, "Summer's Gone" paints a vivid picture of moving on from the past and embracing the present self, while the title track celebrates unabashed ownership and pride in one's unique eccentricities.

In a statement reflecting on the EP, Sharma shared, "The EP for me represents the start of the next chapter in the story of FuzzCulture. The synths and sounds are all analog, the vocals are raw, and the videos are all self-directed, giving a complete overview of the imagination I have in my head while making music. I hope this EP brings people a little bit closer to the essence of what FuzzCulture is meant to be." **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Debajyoti Biswas Offers Serene Soundscapes on New EP 'Changing'

The five-track record houses ballads, pop-rock elements and soulful songwriting

Kolkata/Dublin singer-songwriter Debajyoti Biswas has always been attracted to rock music and cites the likes of Pink Floyd, Dream Theater, Coldplay and John Mayer as inspirations. He says, "I picked up the guitar at the age of 14 and started performing in school fests and local musical events as the lead vocalist of my school band." After releasing music with his previous band Jagged Krystal, Biswas branched out as a solo performer and released his nine-track full-length debut album *Nexus of Dreams* in 2019 and followed that with a single called "Heaven" in 2021.

Now, the musician is out with a new five-track EP entitled *Changing*. The record has been in the works for the last three years and Biswas tapped producer Abhibroto Mitra to help bring the songs to life. "He [Mitra] breathed life into the arrangements of the songs. That's when it all came together in the form of an EP."

Changing opens with the reflective title track before we hear the piano-aided "Daydreamer." The mid-record song is the rock ballad "Fly" followed by the EP's penultimate track, the poignant "Falling." The EP closes with the optimistic "Free." Talking about the EP, Biswas says, "Changing is a reflection on coping with change, which can be overwhelming sometimes. The EP navigates an inward journey to gather the broken pieces and start over again. The lyrics of the EP blend feelings of loneliness, heartbreak and self-discovery with an undertone of hope."

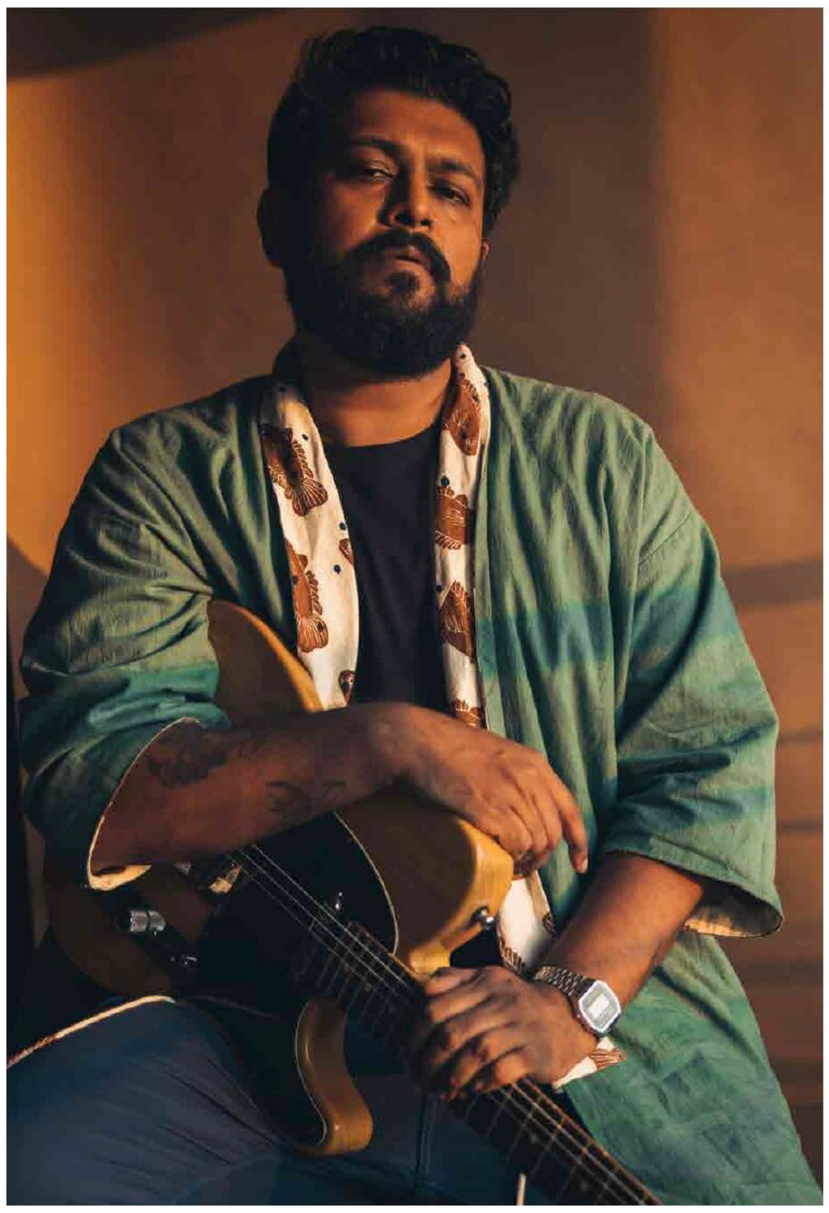
Sonically, the record includes softer rock tones and tranquil soundscapes as well as pop-rock elements. "I feel the words and tunes of this EP will build a connection with listeners, remind them to embrace their vulnerabilities and find hope in the darkest of times," says Biswas.

Currently, Biswas is working on a follow-up five-track EP called *Finding Myself*. The singer-songwriter plans on releasing the next record as singles over the next few months while also plotting to perform live while he's in Europe. He says, "I also look forward to collaborating with other artists and growing as a musician." **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Rono Releases Charming New Single 'All Afternoon'

The track is the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's second release of the year



Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Ronit Sarkar aka Rono is out with a brand new single entitled "All Afternoon." The latest track comes after the musician's previous release this year, the evoking "Raat." "All Afternoon" is an ode to love and includes Rono's meticulous musical sensibilities from pop songwriting to bluesy guitar parts and groovy rhythms.

Talking about the track, Rono says, "This might be one of the most all-out love songs I have ever written. It's inspired by the feeling of falling for someone all over again, and just spending time feeling each other's company, being silly and stupid and vulnerable." The singer-songwriter adds, "It's slow and sparse to begin, and then gently and gradually builds to a false climax that then suddenly bursts into a psychedelic guitar solo. It takes sonic cues from D'angelo and Mayer. Instrumentally, it's just live drums, bass, an electric piano and a bunch of electric guitar. I really enjoyed getting to be a guitar player on this; I usually use guitars to build ambiance or grit, this is the first time I've done so much melodic work with it."

With a music video for "All Afternoon" set to be released soon, going forward Rono plans to release two more singles, one in Hindi and the other in English. **DAVID BRITTO**

GAURAV SAWN

Kavya Jones Drops Saccharine Pop Song 'Oo Oo Mere Dil Mein Tu'

The track has been produced by singer-composer Leslee Lewis

MUMBAI-BASED singer Kavya Jones is out with a brand new pop single called "Oo Oo Mere Dil Mein Tu." The track follows last year's "Tu Hai Mera" and includes the production touch from seasoned artist Leslee Lewis (from fusion/pop duo Colonial Cousins).

In this interview with Rolling Stone India, Jones talks to us about her early years and how she joined Lewis' band, her new song and what's coming up next. Read excerpts below.

How did you fall into music and then join Leslee Lewis' band?

My parents are both in the field of entertainment. I started singing when I was five years old. I started training in Hindustani classical when I was 10, after that I went into Western classical and then I joined The Stop Gaps as a soprano singer for two years. I was a part of that choir, so I've got the taste of both worlds. But I think when I went to college, I got exposed to college festivals.

So, music somehow took a backseat. Then I got into dance, modeling, and acting, and somehow, I didn't sing. For my graduation, that's when I joined a fusion group, and we started doing all these college festivals. A couple of years later I was told that Leslee Lewis was looking out for a female vocalist, and I joined his band and actually, it just happened. When I joined the band, I think I came into the mainstream. Now I'm in the professional field, music is not just a hobby, now it's a job.

What can you tell us about your new song "Oo Oo Mere Dil Mein Tu"?

It's a pop song. We were contemplating whether I should come out with a ballad or another pop song. What should I do? I felt I should do something along the lines of it being a pop song. So sir [Lewis] came up with this really cool track. When he played me the song, it was an instant connection because if you hear the song, the instrumentation around the song is very jazz, but the singing is very pop. When the lyrics were coming to play, it felt like a young 15-year-old or 18-year-old girl talking about her crush to her friends.

There's a video coming out also to accompany the song, what can we expect from it?

The video is interesting, I've got six young school-going girls dancing and we look at the camera to tell that guy there that you are mine. So, the video is different than what I've done before and it has a storyline.

What's coming up next for you?

There are a few songs that I have sung which I've done with a few other people. I'm hoping that those should be released early next year. They are collaborations with young artists. DAVID BRITTO

"When the lyrics were coming to play, it felt like a young 15-year-old or 18-year-old girl talking about her crush to her friends."

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Snarky Puppy Hit All the Right Notes at Mumbai Gig

The American jazz fusion band were back performing in India after nearly a decade

This past weekend on December 2nd, Mumbai's Bayview Lawns witnessed two incredible performances. One by Edinburgh power rock/funk trio High Fade and the other from American Grammy Award winners Snarky Puppy. With a show in Gurugram the following day, the two-city tour for both acts was organized by Paytm Insider in partnership with Hyperlink Brand Solutions.

The scenic backdrop at Bayview Lawns is one of the best settings in Mumbai to host a live music event. The gig kicked off at about 7:00 pm with High Fade taking to the stage in blistering form. The trio – comprising guitarist-vocalist Harry Valentino, bassist Oliver Sentance and drummer Calvin Davidson – were at their pulsating best as they delivered their distinctive blend of vintage 70s and 80s vibes, seamlessly fusing funk, rock, pop, and disco. Infused with an infectious style and unparalleled energy, High Fade's performance also showcased plenty of dynamics and dexterity. The band's hour-long setlist included tracks such as "Burnt Toast & Coffee," "Fur Coat" and "Lifes To Fast, Lifes To Slow."

With a half-hour break after High Fade's set, attendees had a chance to head over to the food and beverage area for refreshments and also to catch up with friends. The festive atmosphere at the venue made for quite a treat to be at.

Soon, it was time for American jazz fusion outfit and five-time Grammy Award winners Snarky Puppy to hit the stage. The 11-piece group – led by bassist Michael League – opened their set with material off 2022's album *Empire Central*, with songs that included "Keep It On Your Mind," "East Bay" and "Bet." Next, the band performed "Xavi" off 2019's *Immigrance*. More material off *Empire Central* followed in the shape of "Cliroy," "Pineapple" and "Belmont."

The band then rounded off their 90-minute performance with songs off 2014's *We Like It Here* such as "What About Me?," "Shofukan" and their magnum opus "Lingus," for which they invited sitar player Purbayan Chatterjee to sit in with them on the song. Blending diverse influences such as jazz, rock, world music and funk, Snarky Puppy incorporated unique accents from around the globe through their immersive performance. From tight rhythm sections to free-flowing solos, incredible musicianship and more, the band thoroughly delivered a great evening to their fans. League joked about how it had been almost 10 years since they were last on Indian shores, and he promised not to wait that long before they were back again. **DAVID BRITTO**

COURTESY OF THE OTHER CIRCLE

‘Binyeo’, A Korean Hairpin Featured in Period K-Dramas

A crucial part of Korean jewelry throughout the three-kingdom era, Binyeo wasn’t just an aesthetic delight but disclosed a person’s identity, class, and beyond

IT’S INTERESTING, how well jewelry may transcend cultural barriers; the Binyeo, for instance, is a manifestation of such crossings that connect people globally. The other day, I saw my mom braiding a bun and slipping a patterned hairpin while preparing for an event. The gorgeous bling, she said, was purchased from Kurseong last year. “That does resemble a Binyeo,” I said. I’ve seen them a lot in period K-dramas.

Gold and silver Binyeos were associated with the nobility, while widows wore wooden Binyeos. The circular bottoms of these hairpins represented wealth, health, and vitality and were carefully crafted to fit seasons, events, daily wear, and age.

The Korean Binyeo is essentially their traditional hairpin. It can be long or U-shaped and be used to both embellish and secure the hair buns intact. Appearing in the Goryo, Joseon, and Silla kingdoms of Korean history, the ornament was perhaps designed with both genders in mind. But in time, as social mores evolved, the Binyeo ended up being restricted to women.

A crucial part of Korean jewelry throughout the three-kingdom era, it wasn't just an aesthetic delight but disclosed a person's identity, class, and beyond. That explains why we see historical K-drama characters sporting a variety of Binyeos.

The reign of King Yeongjo in the Joseon Dynasty saw the rise of Binyeo. As part of a custom that marked their transition into adulthood, girls would wear Binyeos in their hair. In marriages, the bride would get a Binyeo as a token of love from the groom, per an *Asia Society* article, and it was also a tool at the time for romantic rendezvous.

This could be a fallacy; I'm not sure though—the Binyeo was supposed to have an impact on the deaths of a female's parents. Some would remove them and let their hair fall as a sort of reparation for their belief that they were to blame for the loss. Later, they would make a hair bun and swap out their Binyeo for a wooden one that would be used for the next few years.

The hierarchical structure of the Silla dynasty banned the use of Binyeo in keeping with social division along racial lines. When it came to shapes, commoners were limited, while the imperial family had access to a wide variety of Binyeos. They replaced the wigs worn by many married women as a symbol of their social status.

Gold and silver Binyeos were associated with the nobility, while widows wore wooden Binyeos. The circular bottoms of these hairpins represented wealth, health, and vitality and were carefully crafted to fit seasons, events, daily wear, and age.

In an interview with *The Korea Times*, noted jewelry designer Kim Soung-eun explained that phoenix Binyeos were worn by queens and princesses in the Joseon Dynasty. Her creations have been featured in several historical K-dramas. Royal concubines, on the other hand, donned lovebird Binyeos. The phoenix Binyeo, she said, represents ambition, passion, and the pursuit of power, as exemplified by Seol In-ah in the immensely popular K-drama *Mr. Queen* (2020-2021), where she plays Jo Hwa-jin, Royal Noble Consort Ui, King Cheoljong's concubine and first love.

Binyeo has a Chinese equivalent, Ji, a Chinese hair stick, and a Japanese equivalent, Kanzashi, a variety of hair ornaments including hairpins, clips, fabric flowers, and clips. Similar hairpins, for that matter, have emerged through the ages, acting as icons and vital elements of different faiths and cultures. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO: COURTESY OF TVN

Blackpink's Jisoo's K-Drama Comeback Begins with K-Zombie 'Influenza'

In the K-drama, Jisoo will star as Kang Young-joo, abruptly reuniting with her ex and braving zombies in an apocalyptic Seoul

COURTESY OF YG ENTERTAINMENT

K-ZOMBIES' TREATMENT of serious social issues reveals how they can turn the apocalypse into entertainment. *Influenza*, an upcoming *Coupang Play* action horror thriller drama series starring Jisoo, will add to some of the best titles representing the genre—*Train to Busan* (2016)—that set the stage for more grisly on-screen zombie breakouts like *Kingdom* (2019), *Peninsula* (2020), *Alive* (2020), *Happiness* (2021), and *All of Us Are Dead* (2022).

Soon after Jisoo acknowledged her presence in the show, it went abuzz, piquing interest and curiosity concerning the rest of the cast, which has also been reported to include Park Jung-min in a lead role alongside the K-pop superstar but is yet to be confirmed.

Influenza is a crisis-ridden scenario that kicks off when people contract a weird contagious flu, turning them into zombies, and a struggle for survival in the face of impending horrific human extinction begins.

The plot, based on Han Sang-woon's novel of the same name, unfolds in a bustling Seoul tower amid an effort to control the mushrooming sickness. Lee Jae-yoon, undergoing conscription, is deployed there to serve in the defense unit. Meanwhile, his sweetheart, Kang Young-joo (Jisoo), writes him a letter urging a breakup. Mayhem hits as the flu-stricken individuals within the building start morphing into zombies.

Jae-yoon and his colleagues, distraught as they are, must defend both themselves and others, for zombies are multiplying in the building, getting ghastlier by the minute. And circumstantially, against the flocking undead, Jae-hoon and Young-joo inadvertently reunite.

Influenza is Jisoo's sophomore K-drama project. She stated that the series will go into production shortly, and her role is very challenging in tandem with the narrative's emphasis on frenetic action, profanity, hysteria, and horror.

Jisoo previously starred with Jung Ha-in in the action-romance black comedy *Snowdrop* (2021). She played the role of Eun Yeong-ro, a college undergraduate who valiantly battles to shield injured North Korean agent Lim Soo-ho (Jung) from his assailants, tend to his wounds, and fall in love with him.

Jisoo has also said that *Influenza* will necessitate her getting training to pull off its action. Its storyline and portrayal of events, I imagine, will stick out more since it features screenwriter Han Jin-won, best known for *Parasite*, which earned him an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay at the 92nd Academy Awards in 2020. He shared it with director Bong Joon-ho, making them the first Asian writers to win at the Oscars for screenwriting.

DEBASHREE DUTTA

‘Marry My Husband’ is Rife with Revenge, Romance, and a New Park Min-young

The upcoming K-drama stars Park Min-young in a very demanding role. It took her to lose substantial weight to portray a waning cancer patient

MARRY MY HUSBAND is slated for a January 1, 2024, release and is, as expected, catching on ahead of its premiere. Thanks to its narrative drawing on the popular same-named webtoon and unarguably Park Min-young blowing us away, starring as its female lead.

Marry My Husband is an instance of betrayal, revenge, and romance. It goes over Kang Ji-won (Park), caught between her mother-in-law’s stringent calls for, a self-centered debt-ridden husband Park Min-hwan (Lee Yi-kyung), and her urgent family obligations. As bleak as it can get, Ji-won’s life is going to the grave—she has cancer weighing on it. Even worse, her spouse is having an extramarital affair with her bestie Jung Soo-min (Song Ha-yoon).

On a fateful night of heated exchange, a brawl breaks out as Ji-won walks in on the two of them sleeping and ends up dying at the hands of her husband. Cut to Ji-won waking up in the past (but remembering the present), when she was dating Min-hwan. The status quo hints at a second shot at life; she resolves to exact payback by causing Min-hwan to marry Soo-min. Extending help is Yoo Ji-hyeok (Na In-woo), a colleague who feels for her and holds a secret of his own.

Park conveys the wide-eyed vulnerability of Ji-won in the stills published for the K-drama. Her pallid countenance reflects the pained anxiety of her predicament. Throughout her illustrious career, Park has had myriad roles, with several award-winning ones to her credit. A highly acclaimed Korean actress that she is, Park is renowned for seamless on-screen chemistry with her co-stars. She has, however, been pigeonholed into conventional romance roles. A departure from that may be *Marry My Husband*, Park’s act in a more demanding role—it took her to lose substantial weight—to just 37 kg—and breathe life into Ji-won, the waning cancer patient.

As regards the story, I’ve read the webtoon by Sungsojak, a studio LICO production known for their proclivity for creating more relatable stories. In how the comic unfolds, it could be a bit confusing initially, but deeper into it, everything makes sense.

Marry My Husband boils down to how Ji-won chooses to rewrite what lies ahead, traveling back in time and altering fate after suffering at the hands of two of the people she cared about most. It’s entertaining in its predictability, but it also offers a sense of variance. The dramatization should, hopefully, reinforce the narrative. I love how Park Min-young portrays Kang Ji-won—an unassuming peril who is willing to do more than one may have ever expected out of her. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

COURTESY OF TVN

Making Breakthroughs XG's Global Appeal is Expanding

XG's engaging music and style persist in pushing limits, tearing down norms that resonate with audiences globally

THESE GIRLS are Japanese; they are based in South Korea; they sing in English; and they are making waves across the globe.

As a key component of "A New Breed Breaking Boundaries," the burgeoning XG aims to tear down norms and preconceived notions, instill fresh attitudes via ingenuity, and share with youths everywhere the value of focusing on what matters, pursuing dreams head-on, and having the fortitude to see them through.

Their engaging music and style mirror that, that persists in pushing limits. It all began in January last year via their social media accounts. Following the release of a plethora of rap and song teaser videos over the next few weeks, XG's dance solo clips gained a steady stream of followers.

Hip-hop and R&B primarily drive XG: Jurin, Chisa, Harvey, Hinata, Juria, Maya, and Cocona, who released their first single, "Tippy Toes," in March 2022 through XGALX, a worldwide entertainment production label that fosters artists with distinctive perspectives and brings the world to avant-garde culture.

Their second single, "Mascara," came out in June of the same year, and "Shooting Star," the third, dropped on January 25, 2023. "XG" is an acronym for "Xtraordinary Girls," which signifies its commitment to unique content, inspiring people from every walk of life through its concerts and distinct musical palettes.

During the band's interview with *Billboard*, its executive producer, Park Simon Junho, said that the group aims to offer music and performances that resonate with audiences globally, transcend genres, and convey a universal message.

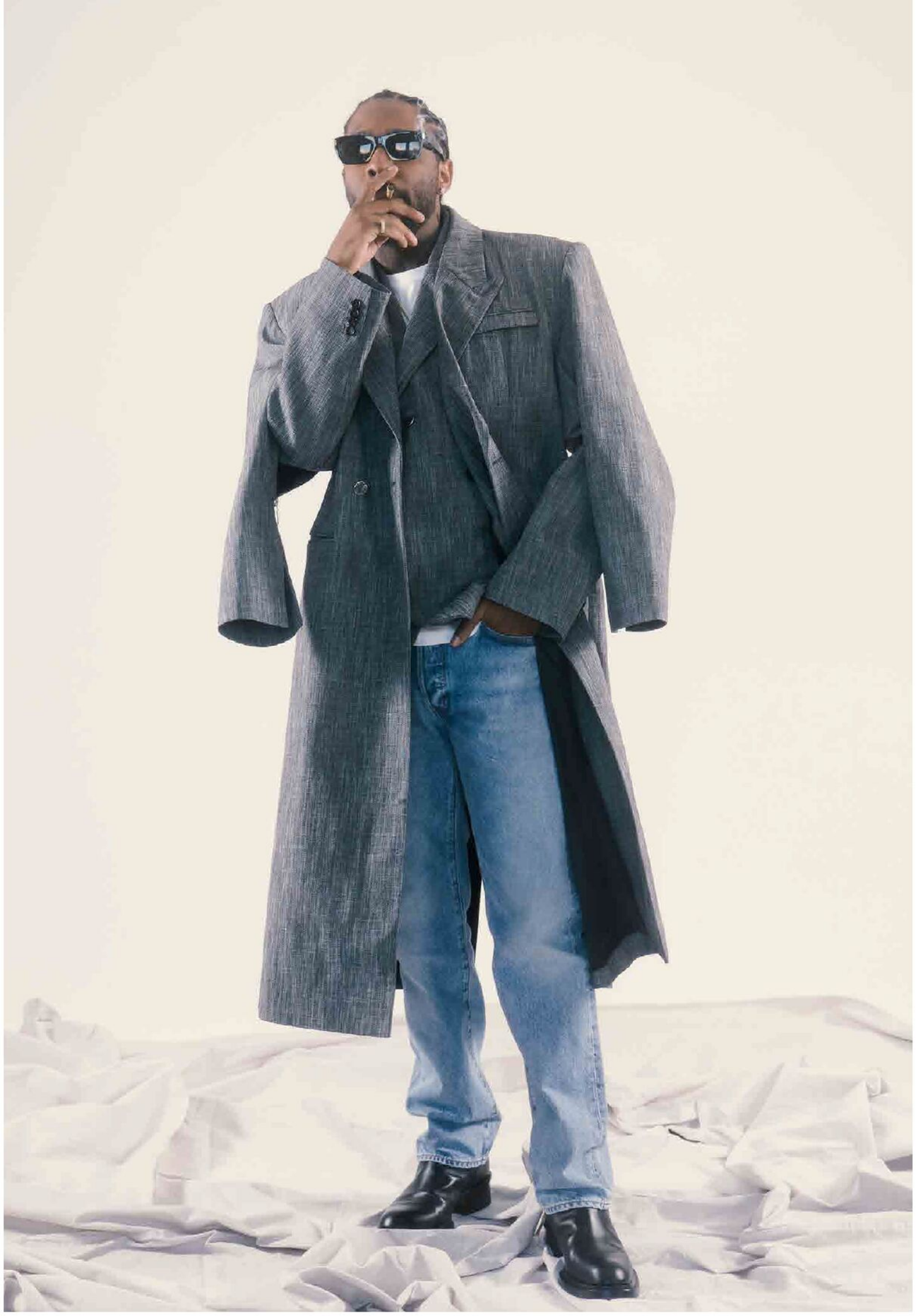
Recently, the septet staged their first solo audience live "XG 'New DNA' Showcase in Japan" on November 26. Their January single, "Left Right," was chosen for *Rolling Stone*'s "100 Best Songs of 2023," placing them as the sole Japanese act on the list at position 77. The song has an R&B vibe to it, with elements like synth raps that are addictive, powerful bass, trap beats, hit-hats, and repeated loops. The music video features a lavish presentation with settings and costumes reminiscent of the 1970s and 1990s in a space travel theme.

With their 13-week run on the U.S. radio chart "Mediabase Top 40 Radio Airplay," XG made a record earlier this year as the first Japanese female artist and group to be ranked. It underscored XG's enormous appeal on a global scale as it secured its place as the longest-running Asian girl group on the chart.

Per *Luminate*, XG has exceeded 625 million on-demand streams and has maintained exponentially increasing playlist streams in recent times. In *Spotify's* recently unveiled "2023 Wrapped," XG further revealed their worldwide success by coming in third in "Most Played Overseas by a Domestic Artist" and sixth and seventh in "Most Played Track Overseas by Domestic Artists" for the tracks "Shooting Star" and "Left and Right." **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

In Spotify's "2023 Wrapped," XG revealed their worldwide success by coming in third in "Most Played Overseas by a Domestic Artist" and sixth and seventh in "Most Played Track Overseas by Domestic Artists" for the tracks "Shooting Star" and "Left and Right."

PHOTO COURTESY OF XGALX



MARK "PEACED" PANGILINAN

Q&A

Brent Faiyaz

The R&B superstar on bad habits, zodiac signs, Mob movies, and raising the bar for live vocals on tour

By LARISHA PAUL

Listen to Brent Faiyaz's music long enough and his life starts to sound like a movie. He's the director, screenwriter, and main character in an imaginary film born from late nights in big cities, hushed conversations with women at loud parties, and emotions felt without penitence. Faiyaz doesn't see himself as a villain, even when he sings about sending those "You up?" texts that he probably shouldn't, or upending a good thing to see if the grass is greener on the other side. But he isn't all that sorry if you see him that way. His catalog to date has earned a stunning 7.2 billion global on-demand streams, according to Luminate data. For his third studio album, *Larger Than Life*, he stayed true to his vision. "This is how I see the world. This is my universe. This is what we do. This is what it feels like," the Maryland native, 28, says over Zoom. "What I look like letting motherfuckers tell me what my world looks like?"

You've been called a "toxic king" of R&B. Do you feel like that term is overused these days?

I think it's all about what you're used to. To some people, I might say some brutal, outrageous shit. But to motherfuckers who hear outrageous shit, I'm not really saying nothing that crazy. I grew up on Max B and Dipset. People who haven't been exposed to certain environments will see shit for the first time and it's outrageous to them.

What's your biggest vice, and how do you break cycles of bad habits like the ones you explore on your recent single "WY@"?

I'm a procrastinator, I'm a frivolous spender, and I definitely spend a lot of time with a lot of different women. That record reflects having access and opportunity, and having to say no to certain shit — or the inability to say no to certain shit. That record is about addiction in a way, shape, or form, but more from the perspective of submitting to it versus fighting against it. It touches on addiction in a way that makes it a little more seductive.

Do you know your birth chart?

I'm a Virgo sun, Cancer moon or some shit like that.

Do women ask you that question a lot?

Yeah, that's like the number-one conversation. "What's your birthday? Do you know what time you were born?" Motherfuckers love talking that zodiac shit. I think it's good conversation. It's fun if you at a spot and you meet somebody — you want to chat to 'em, just ask them about some zodiac shit.

Does astrology hold any weight to you?

Sometimes I'm curious to know whether we truly are defined by our zodiac signs, or whether we all exhibit traits that everybody exhibits, and we learn our zodiac sign and we conform to whatever our sign is. There's been times where a chick asks me, "What's your sign?" And I'd lie and say I'm a fucking Gemini. And they'd be like, "I fucking knew it. You give Gemini vibes."

When you're touring, people always post online about being surprised that you actually sing at shows.

Shit was funny as hell. I was surprised that they were surprised. I'm like, "I came here to do a show. What the fuck y'all thought I was finna do?"

The bar for performance is so low!

You can't cheat these people, man. On some level, when it comes to your creativity, you tell that story in whatever way you see fit. But when it comes to presentation, you for damn sure better give these people something to talk about.

Your tour wraps soon in Paris. Have you seen the headlines about the bedbug outbreak over there?

This the first I'm hearing about it. I'm just getting over the flu, and you're talking about some damn bedbugs? I've never even seen a bedbug. I'm not trying to see my first one on tour. If they finna be following me around, they need to buy some tickets or carry some merch. Make their little asses useful.

Do you see parallels between the ways people tell stories in music and film?

I get inspired so much by movies. I'll watch a movie, or I'll peep a scenario in a TV show, and I'll just start scoring it. I'll be in a studio and I'll just place it on mute, or I'll watch cartoons on mute just because a certain scene that evokes a certain emotion will make a certain chord or a certain melody come out.

Who are your favorite film directors?

I'm a big fan of Mob films. I like a lot of violence and shit like that, so I fuck with Scorsese. I like a lot of blood and colors and excitement, so I look at Tarantino films. I like stories and I like seeing Black people portrayed in a way onscreen that's beautiful, so I also watch a lot of Spike Lee and John Singleton. And if I want to look at some shit that's just visually appealing, I put on Wes Anderson.

Directors, and even screenwriters, kind of have it nice, because they can create these stories and present them without being positioned as the face of them. Musicians don't have that same luxury.

I never focus too hard on the reception as much as I do just getting it out, telling the story that I want to tell. I think that's the purest way to create, when I don't really think about nothing other than "This looks good to me. This feels good to me. This sounds good to me." I just let it fly. ®

FESTIVAL REPORT

SPOILSPORT RAIN, SUNSHINE AND TOP-NOTCH SETS RULED AT SHILLONG'S CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL WITH RONAN KEATING, NE-YO AND MORE

The event also featured performances by local acts such as rockers Lou Majaw and Snow White, blues-rock outfit Blue Temptation and more

By **David Britto**

Irish singer-songwriter Ronan Keating.

AFTER HAVING to cancel last year's edition of the Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong, there was a ton of excitement knowing that it was back for 2023. However, things at the RBDSA Sports Complex – where the event was being held – didn't go quite as planned. Scheduled from November 17th till the 19th, the organizers were all set to kick-off proceedings until the rain came in on day one to dampen the mood which led to the cancellation of performances for that day. However, on day two, thankfully it was bright and sunny, and things went ahead as planned. Across the festival ground were the three stages, the Main Stage, the Cherry Blossom Stage and The Dome as well as a shopping area, tons of food and beverage options and even a kid's zone.

SNOW WHITE SETS THE TONE AND NE-YO DELIVERS

At around 5:30 pm the music began at the Main Stage with a set from Shillong hip-hop artist Banjop where he played his tracks "Bawsing" and "Sming Smong." Next, Assam singer-songwriter/rapper Rahul Rajkhowa brought his eclectic sound to the festival from his silky vocals to fiery rap skills as well as some sublime fretwork too. Rajkhowa's R&B pop sound and reggae rock elements included songs such as "Bad Girls" (his collab with K-Pop artist Jimmy Brown) and "Royalty" wherein he brought out rapper G'nie to join him on stage. This performance was followed by drummer Tenny, who also accompanied Rajkhowa earlier. Tenny showcased his prog-rock and electro-rock soundscapes through a blazing performance.

Over at the Cherry Blossom Stage, attendees were being treated to a fashion show while the Main Stage was gearing up to hear Shillong hard rock fusion band Snow White. The group were probably one of the standout acts at the festival. The group's tight rhythm section, fiery guitar solos, soaring vocals and more had the crowd in a tizzy. What made Snow White's set special was to see how their Khasi-led songs had most of everyone in the crowd sing along and join in which made for quite a moment. The band also performed an English song titled "Silhouette." At the end of their set, all members of the group stood together and held up a banner that said, "Say no to drugs," which was met by a big applause from the audience.

Next up was Portuguese Linkin Park tribute band Hybrid Theory's rescheduled set as they were meant to play on day one. The band – who made their second India appearance after performing in Imphal last year – opened with "New Divide" which the American group recorded for the 2009 film Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen. The songs that followed included "BURN

American R&B/pop artist Ne-Yo.

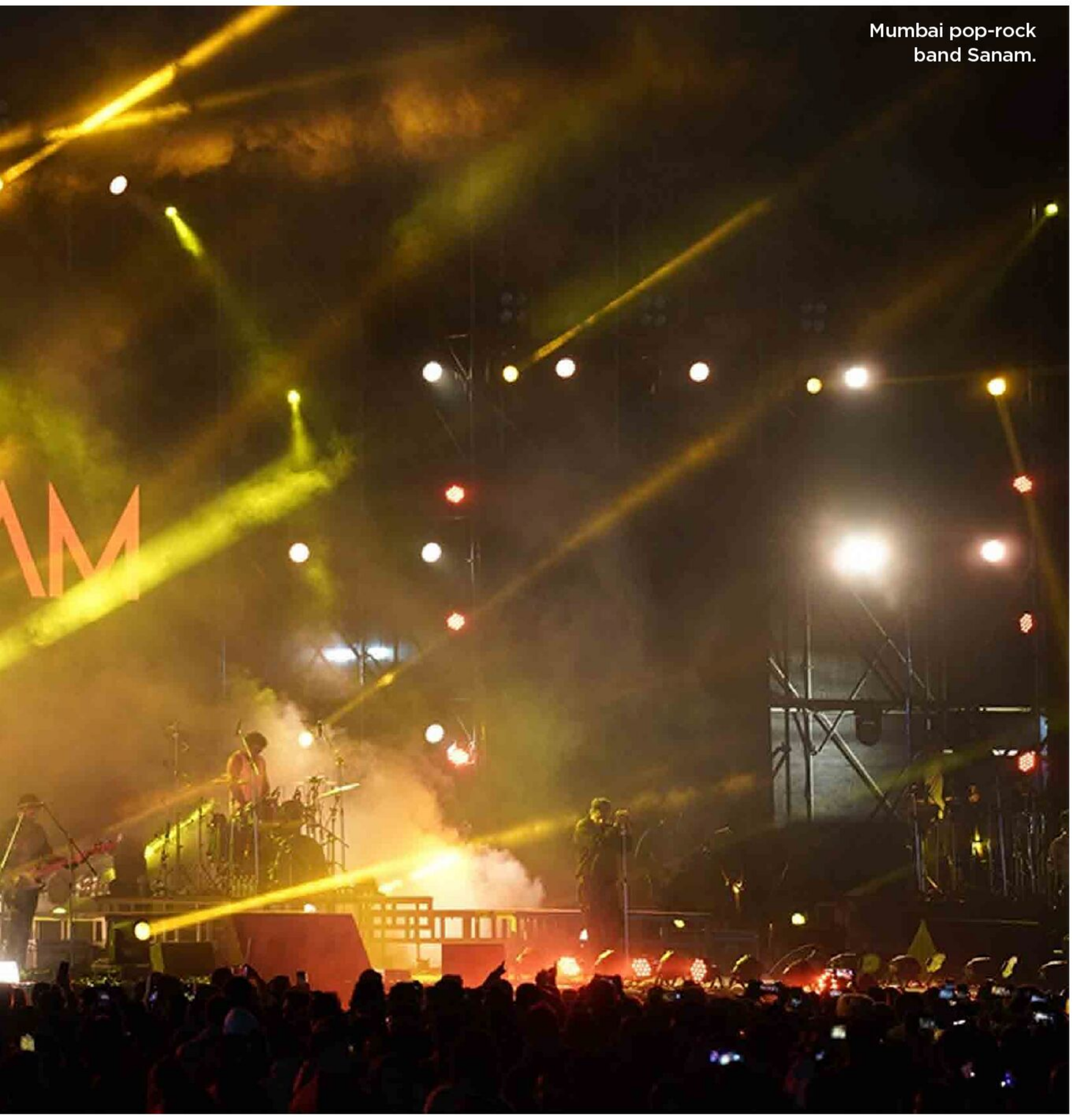
IT DOWN," "Don't Stay," "With You," "Lost," "Given Up" and "Points of Authority." Hybrid Theory then changed things up by performing the softer "One More Light" which had attendees turn on their phone flashlights and point them to the sky, as the band announced that the track was also a tribute to Linkin Park's late frontman Chester Bennington. The group then marched on with hits such as "What I've Done," "In The End," "Numb" and "One Step Closer" before closing their raucous set with "Bleed It Out."

The moment had now arrived for day two's headliner, American R&B/pop artist Ne-Yo to make his India debut at the Cherry Blossom Festival. As soon as the singer stepped on the stage, folks in the crowd began cheering loudly with the opening number "Closer." Dressed in all black with a hat, Ne-Yo was accompanied by his band and his two backup dancers, The Miss Rights, with all three of them busting out moves throughout the set. Ne-Yo then marched on with "One In A Million," "Sexy Love," his Juicy J collaboration "She Knows," "Everybody Loves / The Def of You" and "U 2 Luv." Ne-Yo was at his best with silky and honeyed vocals and plenty of dynamics. The singer then jumped into one of his hit songs, 2006's "So Sick."

During his performance of "PUSH BACK," Ne-Yo invited three women from the crowd to come up on stage for a dance contest. Each of them put on quite a show, with the audience voting for contestant number two as the winner. At this point the singer performed a medley of tracks that he wrote for other artists which included "Hate That I Love You" (Rihanna) and "Irreplaceable" (Beyoncé). The Miss Rights then took center stage to showcase their dance moves before Ne-Yo came back out to sing a new song he released this year called "Link Up." Next, he performed "She Got Her Own" before going into another hit that had the crowd going wild, "Miss Independent." Ne-Yo then closed his set with dance numbers such as his David Guetta collab "Play Hard" and the Pitbull song "Give Me Everything."

LOU MAJAW IS A REAL ROCKSTAR AND RONAN KEATING INVOKES NOSTALGIA

Day three of the festival saw DJ sets at the Dome stage which made for a house party atmosphere while the Cherry Blossom Stage hosted another fashion show as well as a choir contest. Over at the Main Stage hometown blues-rockers Blue Temptation brought the blues and how. The band's setlist



Mumbai pop-rock band Sanam.

Shillong rockers Snow White.

featured their songs "Evil Mind," "Ramble," "Tempted," a Beatles medley and "Wash Your Sins" off their 2018 album *Tempted*. Blue Temptation's frontman Daryll Diengdoh had the crowd in the palm of his hands while his bandmates each delivered to make them sound exquisite.

Up next was 76-year-old legendary Shillong rocker Lou Majaw who turned up the temperature in the cold Shillong air with a fiery set. Majaw opened with the pulsating "Ain't Got Nothing," before performing "Yakeroo Blues" and the reggae/rock number "Set Your Soul On Fire." Majaw was at his utmost best taking his shirt off, teasing the crowd with his dance moves (even putting his guitar in between his legs) and just having an overall good time. Majaw is a rockstar in the truest sense and he's still rocking hard even in his mid-seventies.

Soon it was time for day three headliner, Irish singer and songwriter Ronan Keating to come out to perform. Keating – who recently played shows in Mumbai and Bengaluru – was on the final leg of his 2023 India tour in Shillong. The musician kicked off his set with "Heyday" which swiftly turned into "Lovin' Each Day." The former Boyzone member then performed songs by the boy band such as "Isn't It A Wonder," "Baby Can I Hold You," "Words," and "You Needed Me."

Keating then played "The Way You Make Me Feel," his collaboration with Canadian singer-songwriter Bryan Adams. The musician's setlist also included his version of songs such as "If Tomorrow Never Comes" (by Garth Brooks) and "Father And Son" (by Cat Stevens). Another collaboration, this time with American singer-songwriter LeAnn Rimes called "Last Thing on My Mind" was heard. Of course, there was a loud cheer when Keating played the opening notes to "When You Say Nothing At All," arguably his biggest hit. The singer's closer tracks included Boyzone's "When the Going Gets Tough," a cover of Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl" and the up-tempo "Life Is A Rollercoaster." The artist showcased a vast range of sounds across his 90-minute set and even after being in the music industry for 30 years, he still checks all the boxes for being a top-notch artist.

After Keating, the Cherry Blossom organizers managed to squeeze in Mumbai pop-rock band Sanam after the Rolling Stone India December 2018 cover stars had to miss their headline set on day one due to the rain. The band talked about how they had no idea that they had fans in Shillong as they raced through their set with the crowd singing along to each track.

While the likes of Hybrid Theory and Sanam did manage to perform, most of the other acts from day one missed out on performing at the event. The festival also did have its set of issues such as delays, which saw the likes of hip-hop/R&B artist Meba Ofilia – who was supposed to go on before Ne-Yo – not make it to the stage. A recurring theme at Cherry Blossom was that although artists performed their own songs, there were tons of covers thrown in during their sets not only from those lower down the card but also the headliners. Of course, it's great to play covers to please the audience but at the same time, it's perhaps more enjoyable to perform your own music on a big stage and to a large crowd.

Overall, even with its hiccups, the Cherry Blossom Festival delivered some incredible moments with almost everyone going home a happy camper. Hopefully, at future editions, the event will go off smoother without cancellations, but till then keep rocking Shillong!

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE CHERRY BLOSSOM FESTIVAL.

SHANKAR-EHSAAN-LOY: ‘We Just Feel Blessed That in One Lifetime We Could Create a Good Body Of Work’

The Mumbai-based music composer trio worked on six tracks for the upcoming Zoya Akhtar film ‘The Archies’

By David Britto

P

NETFLIX'S UPCOMING film *The Archies* recently launched its soundtrack album after the release of the singles "Sunoh," "Va Va Voom" and "In Raahon Mein." The 16-track record features the talents of music maestros Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy as well as artists Ankur Tewari, Tejas, Dot., lyricist Javed Akhtar and more.

We caught up with Shankar Mahadevan, Ehsaan Noorani and Loy Mendonsa of Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy (who have composed six songs for the film) to talk about the making of the record, who their favorite *Archies* character is, what their takeaways from the film are and more.

When it comes to the recording and production process for a project like this, how do you tackle it and do you already have in mind what you envision from it?

Noorani: We jam like we normally jam with maybe a drum loop. We came up with all the basic licks, the basic riffs and the melodies, and then went into the studio to do all the live stuff.

Mendonsa: The basic band is always guitar, bass, drums and piano or organ.

From the six songs you've composed, what can you tell me about the songs and what they are about as well as the sonic imprints that they carry?

Noorani: They have a very strong sonic imprint of the time, 64'. Very straightforward guitar, bass, drums, keyboards, organ or piano and there's 'Va Va Voom,' 'Everything Is Politics' that's like a conversation kind of song which is done very musically, like a musical. Even in the visual, in the singing and again very 60s. There's a third song called 'Plum Pudding,' which is really one of our favorite songs. It's a simple tune, just piano, guitar and drums. A very, very catchy song. There's also 'Dishoom Dishoom,' that's a beautiful song because of the way it's been shot and choreographed.

Mahadevan: Basically, it's got one thread, the music is one thread that binds it, but each one is different from the other.

Coming to "Va Va Voom," you've got Tejas singing in Hindi for the first time and Javed Akhtar contributed lyrics to it, what was it like working with Tejas?

Noorani: He was fantastic, very good and very easy to work with.

Mendonsa: He was a little nervous because Shankar was supervising him.

Mahadevan: It was a little out of his territory, but that's what we wanted because the kids are Anglo-Indian in the film. So that little stress about singing in Hindi, that really helps in getting the character out. He worked really hard on the language. It had to be true to his character, at the same time it shouldn't be anglicized for the sake of it being anglicized, the Hindi should be correct, but at the same time you know that he is from that style of speaking and living, the Anglo Indian 1960s family. So, he got that correctly because he's naturally like that.

I'm sure of course you are all familiar with the *Archies*. Do you have any favorite characters?

Noorani: Jughead [*laughs*]. I think all three of us love Jughead.

Mahadevan: I like Big Ethel also [*laughs*].

Do you go back to listen to 'Sugar Sugar' and the Archies band?

Noorani: Yeah, that's a song we've grown up listening to. There used to be a program that came out on Saturdays called *Saturday Date* and one of the songs that always played was 'Sugar Sugar' [*laughs*].

You have probably already seen the upcoming Zoya Akhtar film *The Archies* before it's out, what are your takeaways from it?

Noorani: Really lovely film to watch.

Mendonsa: Also, I must say she captures the whole vibe of an era that happened in India. It's not alien. A lot of people might say but that that's not possible, it could not happen, but if hip-hop is happening in India right now that bloody well could have happened that time. And it did happen.

Mahadevan: If anybody could capture the essence of a difficult time, difficult genre, difficult era, it can be Zoya Akhtar, nobody else.

Ankur Tewari has also been heavily involved with this project, what was it like working with him?

Mahadevan: It was lovely collaborating with him. He really helped us put things together. See a project like this you need a lot of sourced music, a lot of new singers, young kids, new bands to listen to, and he was a great help. He and I used to write dummy lyrics before Javid sir comes into the room to present it to, to just to feel the energy and it was just a lovely vibe working with Ankur. I mean, it was a very comforting feeling to have. Otherwise, we would have been quite uncomfortable having another person in the studio. But having Ankur was always a joy.

Any closing notes?

Noorani: It's just a lot of fun, the entire album. It's great music and I really like this album. We love it.

Mahadevan: We just feel blessed that in one lifetime we could create a good body of work. ®

COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS

DJ KHALED CAN'T STOP WINNING

LATELY, DJ KHALED has been listening to a lot of Jay-Z. Namely *The Blueprint*, the 2001 opus that helped solidify Hov as a commercial juggernaut in hip-hop. On an August afternoon in Miami, in the living room of the more-than-12,000-square-foot South Beach mansion he's affectionately dubbed "the Resort," Khaled cues up "Heart of the City." He says it's the type of energy that he wants from his upcoming 14th studio album, *Til Next Time*. The kind of music people play "to motivate themselves, to sing or rap along to," he says. "Anthems."

Khaled, 47, has made a life out of motivation. In the rap community, he's been a reliable source of hits rooted in the rags-to-riches ethos of the genre. All he does is win, as he emphatically told us in 2010, and his hustler's intuition has laid the foundation for a decades-long career working alongside some of the biggest names in music, from Jay-Z and Beyoncé to Drake, Justin Bieber, and Rihanna. Khaled's relentless positivity is by now a part of the DNA of popular culture. When you hear him chant his name — stretching the syllables in the word "DJ" to their phonetic limit — you know it's going to be a banger.

At home, on the golf course, and into a new phase with the most relentlessly inspiring man in music

By Jeff Ihaza
Photographs by Devin Christopher

WE THE BEST

Despite being something of an architectural marvel, Khaled's house manages to still feel cozy. Across the room, there are kids' toys for his sons Asahd, six, and Aalam, three, within view, and the family cat, Coco, shuffles pensively around the back hallway. Photos of the family occupy space on pretty much every surface. It's like being at your uncle's house if your uncle had a handful of certified platinum records under his belt.

At home, Khaled makes sure to get dressed up for the occasion of our interview, wearing a Loewe button-down shirt and black trousers, along with a pair of J Balvin Air Jordan 3's. He and the Colombian star recently collaborated on a single called "Dientes," featuring R&B legend Usher. "He's the biggest hype man in the world," Balvin says of Khaled, before jokingly adding, "And the way he dances is amazing, too."

Khaled wears a pristinely lined haircut. His beard follows sharp angles that enforce a perfect symmetry along his face. When he's trying to find the right word, either for clarity or comedic timing, his eyes carry a piercing seriousness, like an athlete laser-focused on a play. But he's largely instinctive in his delivery — in plucking whatever he's trying to convey from his brain and placing it into yours.

Before we start our first interview, he gets inspired to film a clip for Instagram, pausing for a moment before a new catchphrase comes to him: "Call me tangerine!" he says, referring to his new factory-diamond Rolex with an orange bezel the color of a tangerine. He does a few takes before landing on the one that his 37 million Instagram followers will eventually see.

Khaled excels at bringing his playful energy to social media, where his witticisms have the same staying power as the hip-hop hits he's so astute at constructing: "Another One," "Major Key," "Cloth Talk," the list goes on. Since his first posts on Snapchat, in 2015, Khaled has tapped into the zeitgeist by simply being himself. Lately, he's been on another hot streak, as his musings from his home and, more recently, the golf course have become social media sensations. "I was just telling everybody that's been around me, I'm like, 'Yo, is it me or this energy is happening again?'" he says. "Because I don't plan this. This is just God. I'm watching all my fans going, 'Tell them to bring out the whole ocean,' or 'Cappuccino.' I'm seeing bootleggers making T-shirts."

There's certainly an abundance of material for people to latch onto. Like the video of Khaled asking his private chef about each of the dishes on his plate before abruptly interjecting, "Have you ever played rugby?" Or the clip of Khaled at home one night faced with a bountiful spread of seafood leftovers. As he squeezes a lemon onto some lobster, he turns the camera around and shouts, "Tell 'em to bring out the whole ocean!" Or, perhaps the best of Khaled's recent clips: the one where he casually swings a golf cart around on the beach, two of its tires briefly leaving the ground, before driving up to the camera to declare that "life is roadblocks" (except his pronunciation lands closer to *Roblox*, the popular video game for children).

But is it all an act? How is it possible for a human being to radiate so much absurd positivity at all times? "My energy is always at a great level, high level, and I'm a go-getter and nothing is going to stop me," Khaled says. "I feel like God gave me a purpose to find a way to make the world better, and that's a

big responsibility. But I'm going to do my best. If you wake up every day and show gratitude, that's how you find happiness."

It's a familiar refrain from Khaled, who's gone so far as to turn his unbridled optimism into a *New York Times* bestseller in *The Keys: A Memoir,* published in 2016. Coming from anyone else's mouth, it might even sound corny or disingenuous. But in person, Khaled doesn't seem to have the capacity for fakeness. His larger-than-life personality and unwavering belief in "spreading love" are reflections of the man's interior. In many ways, it's the reason he's been able to team up with top-flight talent for so long. Khaled might be the purest soul in all of music, something like hip-hop's Ted Lasso. "I promise you, everyone, I don't sit there and think, 'Let me think of something,'" Khaled says of his jokes. "It just comes out. That's just me being me. I'm not scared to be me."

KHALED'S OUTLOOK HAS been a winning formula for years. His studio debut, 2006's *Listennn ... the Album,* premiered at Number 12 on the charts and quickly established Khaled as the kind of hitmaker who could bring together a who's who of cross-regional collaborators like Lil Wayne, Paul Wall, Fat Joe, Rick Ross, and Pitbull, all of whom appeared on the single "Holla at Me." "DJ Khaled is one of one," Wayne says. "He's produced so many memorable tracks. There's no one like him." The next year, Khaled followed up his debut with *We the Best,* introducing the name of his future label imprint to the masses. In 2009, Khaled was named the president of Def Jam South, bringing We the Best Music along for the ride. In this position, he oversaw albums from Young Jeezy, Ludacris, and Rick Ross before leaving in 2011 to work under Cash Money.

All the while, Khaled's releases have flowed consistently every year or so, building out a star-studded universe through accretion. His relationship with Drake has been uniquely fruitful, as the pair have collaborated on hits like "Greece" and "Popstar," both from 2021. He teamed up with Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and Future on 2018's "Top Off," and sampled Santana on 2017's Rihanna-assisted hit "Wild Thoughts." That same year, he landed his first and only Number One hit when he teamed up with Bieber for "I'm the One" (not to be confused with 2011's "I'm on One," featuring Drake, Rick Ross, and Lil Wayne).

Trophies and awards from throughout Khaled's career surround us in the living room — another necessary flourish for an interview of this magnitude, he explains, as his team lays out his Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Award alongside a few Grammys and VMAs. As Khaled would say, these are all blessings that warrant celebration. It's clear that his gratitude is genuine, not an act. You get the sense, sitting next to him, that a part of him still can't believe the extent of his successes, that these tangible reminders serve as a necessary grounding force.

Even so, there's not much left for Khaled to conquer musically, which might explain the sense

PHOTOGRAPHY DIRECTION BY EMMA REEVES. STYLED BY TERRELL JONES. GROOMING BY MARK MARRERO. TAILORING BY GALINA. PHOTOGRAPHY ASSISTANCE BY SAM ROBLES, OSCAR JORDAN, AND DANNY CONDE. DIGITAL TECHNICIAN: JOHN LYNCH. POST-PRODUCTION BY BIANCA CAROSIO FOR S.U.I.T. CREATIVE.

of finality that looms over this next project. In the official album trailer, a promotional tool perfected by Khaled, he alludes to questions of retirement. He also executes a perfect soccer bicycle kick that he swears isn't CGI. "I'm treating it like it's my last album. But it's not a goodbye," he says. "You're going to start seeing and hearing about all these new things that I'm doing. I'm going to be doing more TV and film. We taking over the TV and film. That's what *Til Next Time* is — it's like, 'I'm going to give you an incredible album, but also while I'm giving you that incredible album, you're going to see all these big new moves that I'm doing and new categories that we going to take over.'"

One such new category is golf, a sport that Khaled says he's started to get serious about in the past few years. He adheres to a daily regimen of playing at least nine holes to clear his head. Of course, the internet is well aware. Khaled's love of the sport arrives in frequent video dispatches featuring his new catchphrase: "Let's go golfing!" He's known to deliver the line with an exaggerated, cartoonish drawl. He tells me he's seen the phrase on merchandise at golf tournaments. And his love of the game is helping to break barriers, with rappers like 2 Chainz and Offset among those following Khaled's lead and getting more involved in the historically stuffy, white pastime. Khaled even recently landed on the cover of *Golf Digest*.

A few days after our first interview, I meet Khaled for breakfast at his house before setting off to the Miami Beach Golf Club for a few holes. Unlike in his videos on social media, Khaled is familiar with each dish on his plate and needs no explanation. The ocean, for now, will stay in its place. There's little time for antics, because Khaled has a meeting back at the house this afternoon, and he wants to be sure to get as much time on the course as he can. Khaled is indeed as lighthearted and fun-loving as he seems on social media. But he also doesn't play about his golf routine. After breakfast, his driver pulls the cars out front and we get into the back of Khaled's Maybach, one of 150 special-edition models custom-designed by the late designer Virgil Abloh, which Khaled has named the "Cappuccino."

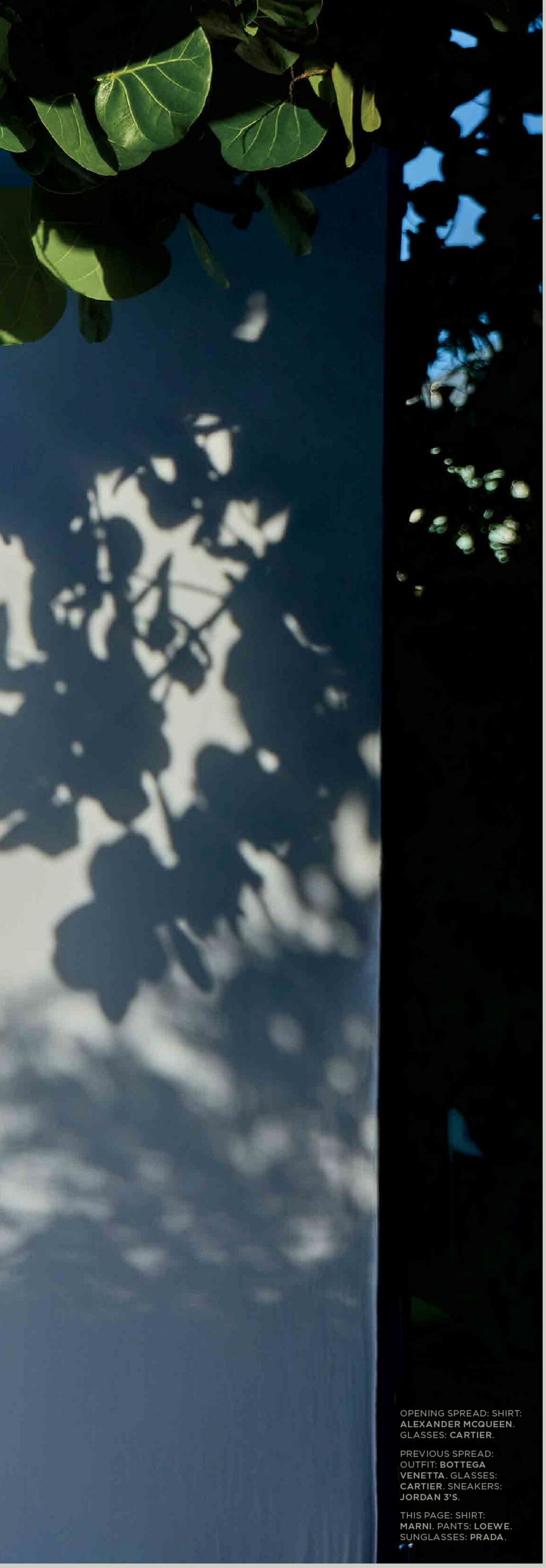
"I feel like God gave me a purpose to make the world better. I'm going to do my best."

It's a quick drive to the course, where we're greeted by staff who seem overjoyed at our arrival. As we get settled, I notice Khaled pull a few hundred-dollar bills from a green Goyard bag — tips for all the staff, which maybe explains their excitement. After we load up the cart and get onto the course, I quickly learn that all of the things fanatics tell you about golf are true. There is a certain serenity that envelops you as soon as you arrive. The air feels lighter, and you can hear a calm flutter of wind breeze through the grass. The course is lush, with winding hills and a lake that snakes through the landscape bordered by dense trees. The environment is relaxing enough to make you briefly forget the devilish August heat dome we're under in Miami.

Khaled is joined by his videographer as well as his content manager, the creative force behind his endless stream of candid videos. The operation is pretty no-frills, and Khaled is a natural in front of the camera. He warms up with his first swing and lets out an animated celebration that's on its way to becoming a new catchphrase: "Right down the middle, let's go!" I briefly feel like I'm behind the scenes on a TV show, except instead of actors, this is a man's real life. Khaled is playing well today, as far as I can tell. While controlling his body so that it moves sort of like a pendulum, he hits the ball extremely hard, causing it to make a very satisfying sound, and it lands pretty close to the hole on his first try. This, I believe, is supposed to be the main point of the sport.

Another group of golfers ahead of us, who look more like your typical golf crowd, in that they are old white guys, notice us and wave at Khaled to say hello. It's like watching an inverted code switch, as they recite his catchphrases with a cool swagger surely indebted to rap's decades at the forefront of American popular culture. Later, I ask Khaled if he knew the men, and he shrugs, saying he had no idea. Anyone watching would have been forgiven for thinking they were old pals.

MARNI



OPENING SPREAD: SHIRT: **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**. GLASSES: **CARTIER**.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: OUTFIT: **BOTTEGA VENETTA**. GLASSES: **CARTIER**. SNEAKERS: **JORDAN 3'S**.

THIS PAGE: SHIRT: **MARNI**. PANTS: **LOEWE**. SUNGLASSES: **PRADA**.

DJ KHALED WAS born in New Orleans but raised primarily in Florida, where he's lived for the past 30 years. "I grew up at a special time," he says. "I got a chance to be the young kid in the Nineties that heard all that music. And in the early 2000s, I got a chance to live my dream."

Both of his parents are Palestinian immigrants to the U.S., and they ran a clothing store throughout Khaled's childhood. He has memories of spending time in the store, getting to hold the pouch of money that came in each day. As he's told it, the store fell on hard times at some point while he was in high school. By then, he'd already begun DJ'ing at parties around Miami before he was old enough to walk into a bar. He dropped out of school and started living on his own around age 17, at first taking on any number of odd jobs. At one time in his youth, he says, he was "heavy" in the bootleg-cellphone game, the closest thing to the underworld he's ever been involved with. He was also a ball boy for the Orlando Magic, remembers Shaquille O'Neal's iconic seasons with the team, and maintains a relationship with the Hall of Famer to this day.

All the while, Khaled's main focus was on music. He would DJ on a pirate radio station that showed love to the burgeoning local rap scene, and eventually, Miami legend Uncle Luke invited him to spin on 99JAMZ, the city's biggest rap station. "He let me co-host and be the DJ while I was doing pirate radio," Khaled recalls. "We was doing it big — I was doing both." He also took several trips to Jamaica around this time, learning about sound-clash culture and solidifying his DJ bona fides.

In the early 2000s, he connected with Fat Joe and Terror Squad, who were becoming a heavy force around Miami after getting started in the Bronx years earlier. Fat Joe recalls being immediately taken by Khaled's sincerity — a rarity in the rap game. "When I first met Khaled, he had an advanced copy of my album on vinyl that I didn't even have," Fat Joe recalls over the phone. "He got nervous because I was Fat Joe, the gangster, at that time, but I fell in love with him immediately. I just saw his charisma, and how sincere he is as a person. And I had him all to myself before the whole world figured out how much of a beautiful person he is, how much of an uplifting character he is."

Khaled started making beats under the name Beat Novocaine, producing a handful of cuts that share the distinct anthemic feeling that's become his staple. He was also a key player in Terror Squad in other ways. "When we did 'Lean Back,' we did it in a studio in his house," Fat Joe says. "I remember when it came to be remix time, I would've never thought I had a chance in the world of getting Eminem. He told me, 'You could get Em.' And I went all out and I got Eminem because Khaled had pushed me to."

Khaled's formative years in radio also made an impression on someone who would become one of his longest-running collaborators, Rick Ross. Khaled produced a song on Ross' 2006 debut, *Port of Miami*, and the two have been close ever since. "He knows what's going to get me excited," Ross says. "He'll run in the room yelling, 'I got some shit, Rozay!' — and nine times out of 10, when he's that excited, it's something that's going to end up feeling good. That's always been the dynamic, since 'I'm So Hood,' and the list goes on."

Ross says that the Khaled that fans see on social media is the same person he's been since the early days of their careers. "When we both had Escalade trucks, before we would go to the clubs on the beach, if we stopped and got gas, he would fucking run up — he would pull up, jump out his truck before you, just to stunt," Ross recalls. "So what you watching him do on golf carts and on Jet Skis and all that shit? That's something that's been going on for many years."

FOR ALL OF his boundless energy and enthusiasm for winning, Khaled has experienced setbacks, even if he's more reticent to talk about them. "You never heard me say somebody gave me a fucked-up deal," he says. "You never heard me say, 'Fuck this person, fuck that, this, that, and that,' because that's not who I am. Because I never look at any situation as a bad situation, even if it's bad. Because it's a learning situation for me to do better, right? And I'm a guy with gratitude."

Still, he admits that he hit a crossroads around 2015. Despite all of the overt successes he'd experienced by then, he says, he was "hustling not smart." For one, he was still renting his home, and after investing his own money into We the Best, he recalls having trouble paying the bills, to the point where he feared losing his lease. "I remember I had like a month to come up with this [large] amount of money," he says. The ordeal triggered a perspective shift for Khaled. "I kept saying, 'There's no way in the world that we worked this much this far and we don't have nothing to show for it.' I changed that right away."

Around the same time, he realized he wanted to take a major step in his life. "I was like, 'Yo, if I want a family, I got to get my shit right.' And I gambled on myself. I always bet on myself from day one. But I tripled down that day."

Khaled began firing himself up with what we now know as his "Major Keys." Those keys were more like exercises in staying present at first. In the videos Khaled would post to Snapchat at the time, he was doing mundane things like taking vitamins, getting manicures, and tending to his garden, all with the bravado and charisma of rap's leading hype man. There's an allure to treating your daily life as worthy of a DJ Khaled producer tag, and to do anything less, according to Khaled, would be to play yourself. (The most important key is to never, ever play yourself.) "I was just talking my shit," he says. "I was going through trials and tribulations. I was talking to myself, and, obviously, it was allowing me to feel my feelings. I didn't know who was following me. This was brand-new for me. I didn't realize the whole world was fucking watching."

When Khaled famously got lost on his Jet Ski in 2015 — trying to get back to his house after a visit with Rick Ross, still out at sea as darkness fell — he posted through the chaos with a familiarity you don't typically get from celebrities. After all, this was social media, where the primped and pruned presentations of our lives tend to embellish even the most humble of lunch spreads. Khaled, meanwhile, had found a way to connect to the masses by offering up his authentic self. Even if his life was more extravagant, it contained the same raw ingredients. Who among us hasn't gotten lost, staving off panic with boisterous optimism? "The key is to make it," Khaled shouted as he struggled to find his way home that fateful evening, as the world watched.

On the back of his newfound viral fame, Khaled signed a partnership with Epic Records in 2016, releasing his *Major Key* album with the label that same year. The record found Khaled rising to the forefront of a changing mainstream, as artists' social media presence became a critical force across the music industry. On the album's cover, Khaled sits stoically next to a lion in front of a robust den of flowers, evidence of his keys' effectiveness. The album features one of Khaled and Drake's biggest hits, "For Free," and was nominated for Best Rap Album at the Grammys. Not long after, Khaled found a way to buy the house he was renting, and a few more for good measure. He also welcomed his first son, Asahd, who was given an executive-producer credit on Khaled's 2019 album, *Father of Asahd*.

Khaled chalks up much of his success to instincts, believing in the power of what you can feel. "You got people that work behind these desks, they hide behind their desks, and they're not even in the field," he says as he drives the golf cart to the next hole. "If you're not in the field, how are you going to feel something? Some people work off of analytics. I work off of heart, blood, sweat, and tears." This year, Khaled returned to his early home at Def Jam, signing a partnership deal with the label to bring his We the Best empire back to where it all began.

Somewhere around the eighth hole, Khaled realizes he's running late for a meeting, so we hop back in the Cappuccino and make our way to his newly opened We the Best sportswear store, a partnership with the retailer Snipes. In the car, Khaled tells me about meeting his wife, Nicole Tuck, 19 years ago, and how on their first date she was joined by her mother. He says he knew right away that he wanted to marry her.

As he's telling me this, I notice onlookers craning their necks sideways to get a view of who might be inside the custom Maybach. One thing about driving such a rare car around town is that people quickly recognize you. Khaled seems at ease; when I ask if he ever worries about security or the possibility of an overly aggressive fan, he seems to not even comprehend the danger.

Sure enough, as we pull into the store's parking lot, a swarm of kids follow us up the block and ask for photos, and Khaled obliges. Earlier in the day, maybe around hole six, he'd posted an Instagram story from our golf cart, letting fans know he'd be going to the store later that day. The fans heeded his call, though I'm told the scene was even more chaotic on opening day. Nonetheless, Khaled stops for what seems like 100 different photos before making his way to his office in the back of the store.

Our visit is something of a pit stop. Khaled wants to show his fans love, but he also has a call scheduled with a handful of radio stations to promote his new single. While we're in his office, a cleanly decorated space adorned with platinum plaques, some fans stand outside by the window hoping to get an autograph or a photo. After the 15 or so minutes of the conference call are up, Khaled is back on the move, shaking hands and signing sneakers.

Once we get back to the car, Khaled tells me he needs to return a FaceTime call from Mark Wahlberg, who was trying to reach him while he was on the other line. The actor is calling about plans they have for the following week, and both of them allude cryptically to an upcoming film that will be a major move for Khaled once it's announced. When informed that a reporter is listening, Wahlberg says to make sure I tell everyone I'm "talking to one of the best entertainers in the world."

Khaled takes my eavesdropping as an opportunity to tell me more about his new interests. These days, his focus is on horizons unseen. "I'm going to work my ass off to make sure that my kids is good forever, and my queen's good forever, and I'm good forever, and my friends are good forever, and my family's good forever," he says. "I want to see every kid have the world. One of my biggest, proudest accomplishments is that the We the Best Foundation continues to grow. So that's part of the next level. Giving more to the kids."

Khaled's foundation hosted its inaugural golf tournament earlier this year, bringing out more than a dozen superstars in music, sports, and beyond, and raising thousands for programs that help Miami's youth. Diddy alone reportedly donated $150,000. The foundation is a big part of the Khaled household's day-to-day activities. "Me, my wife, and my team, our rule is to find a way to help the kids seven days a week," he says. "It's about giving back. The more blessings you give, the more love in the world there will be."

Khaled says his parents sometimes joke with him about running for president, but he's never been interested in that sort of thing. "As far as politics, I never got into it," he says. "It's a never-ending conversation of back and forth. There's never an answer. I'd rather be the person that focuses on the solution of being good at all times and working hard and spreading that love, because you *can* do that."

"Some people work off of analytics," he explains. "I work off of heart, blood, sweat, and tears."

ORIGINALLY, KHALED TELLS me, he was going to name his new album *Love All, Trust Few*. It's a bit of a darker mood than fans might be used to — if he'd gone through with it, it would have been his least-ebullient album title since 2013's *Suffering From Success*. "I live my album titles, so I was kind of being careful," he says. "*Love All, Trust Few* is good, but it can get crazy. I had to make sure I stopped myself early because I was about to get into that zone. I still want to be able to make a record to speak what I feel, too. But it doesn't have to be a whole album of it."

We're back at Khaled's place, in the studio he's built out in the guesthouse. Fun fact: Drake and 21 Savage put the finishing touches on their 2022 album, *Her Loss*, right here at Khaled's house. Drizzy's stay even inspired the invention of a new cocktail by Khaled's chef — a delightful white-peach spritz.

Once we arrive, Khaled tells me he's roughly 75 percent done with his album. He plays me a few works in progress, including the track that ended up with the title "Love All, Trust Few," on which Khaled is indeed on the cusp of a much darker zone. He says he's just gotten vocals in from Drake on another track that he assures me will have the world going crazy.

"Working with Drake is so dope because Drake is just a genius," he says. "And I have this thing called 'I like what Drake likes.' So working with Drake, the ideas flow incredibly. I know it's going to be great because I love Drake's vision, and I don't question it and I listen, you know what I'm saying? And the same way, he loves my vision. That's why we work with each other."

He's also got Burna Boy on the album, and he says he's been feeling inspired lately by Afrobeats, finding a similar spiritual connection to the one he feels with dancehall: Khaled's time in Jamaica early in his DJ career gave him a special affinity for Caribbean culture. He also tells me he'd like to work with Tems and, surprisingly, Tyler, the Creator, with whom he says he has a good rapport, despite a social media tussle when *Father of Asahd* was beaten out by Tyler's Igor on the charts in 2019. (He says they chopped it up at Jay-Z's Roc Nation brunch earlier this year.)

He's got more songs with Lil Uzi Vert on the way, too. He plays a few more tracks he's working on, including another boisterous appearance from Ross that is sure to deliver plenty of goose bumps. Despite my best efforts, though, he keeps the Drake vocals under wraps. About a month after I leave the Resort, he announces a new target for the album release in the most Khaled fashion possible: by posting a series of photos and videos to Instagram in which he is following Drake through the corridors of a sports arena, smiling widely and holding a giant sign that says "I HAVE 2 DRAKE SONGS ON MY NEW ALBUM/COMING 2024."

I ask Khaled several times if he is, in fact, retiring, and while he's committed to the gnomic response of *Til Next Time*, a more accurate answer might be that he doesn't know yet. What seems abundantly clear is that Khaled is approaching a shift in his life, one that he seems to grow increasingly aware of each day.

Back inside on the couch, Khaled tells me about going to Mecca at the end of last year, a trip that, he says, set this next chapter of his life into motion. "It was my first time in the Middle East since I was a kid, since 1984," he says. "I was with Mike Tyson, and I was crying, and he seen the tears coming down my eyes, and he grabbed my shoulder. He goes, 'I did the same thing the first time I was here too.'"

Khaled spent most of his career avoiding flights after a bad experience on a plane from Jamaica years ago. He'd even gone so far as to charter his own bus that shuttled him around the country during the height of his fame. In recent years, partly thanks to the birth of his two children, he's begun to take planes more often.

When he first got to Saudi Arabia, he performed for thousands of fans at the Soundstorm music festival in Riyadh. "I just remember feeling at peace," he says. "It was almost like a missing key that I needed to make a decision to say, 'Let's do some more and go next-level.'"

A few days later, he went to Mecca to perform Umrah, a rite of passage within Islam. That's when the tears came.

"It felt like I was light as a feather, and then I started walking towards the middle, and I was just crying," he says, recalling his words to God.

"I was just telling Him how much I love Him," he continues. "'Thank you for taking care of me and my kids and guiding us and showing us light.' Showing my gratitude."

JACKET: **LOUIS VUITTON**. SHIRT: **ALEXANDER MCQUEEN**. GLASSES: **CARTIER**.

Reviews

Music

DANNY BROWN COMES DOWN

The fearless Detroit rapper faces his demons on one of his most intense LPs yet

By MOSI REEVES

HEAR THIS

Danny Brown

Quaranta

WARP

Since exploding into popular consciousness with *XXX*, a 2011 masterwork detailing his crazed life of sex, pills, and weed, Danny Brown has served as a lodestar for modern rap's perilous embrace of hard drugs. The Detroit rapper utilized a manic, strangely hyper cadence seemingly fueled by too much Molly. More important, he created music with fearlessness, seemingly unconcerned with how the oft-conservative rap world perceived him. When EDM soared in popularity, he penned *Old,* a wildly exuberant 2013 valentine to getting wasted as an elderly thirtysomething.

Then, this past March, Brown used an episode of his podcast, *The Danny Brown Show,* to complain that ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Benjamin Wachenje

IMAGE OF DANNY BROWN IN ILLUSTRATION BASED ON A PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER BESTE

DANNY BROWN

Warp Records was stalling the release of *Quaranta,* an album mostly written at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021. "Where's the urgency?" he asked during a drunken tirade. "What y'all holdin' me up for?" Days later, he checked himself into rehab. Now — and after *Scaring the Hoes,* a deliriously glitchy detour with underground rapper-producer JPEGMAFIA released earlier this year — *Quaranta* finally arrives with a reportedly drug-and-alcohol-free Brown in tow.

The first half of *Quaranta* is fun enough as he spits over fuzzy and psychedelic producers like Quelle Chris and Chris Keys, Kassa Overall, and the Alchemist. "Half the shit I say can't be understood by executives," Brown boasts on "Dark Sword Angel," which unfolds over a hypnotic prog-rock loop. But the second half is notably muted.

Appropriately, the last five songs on *Quaranta* feel like an AA session defined by confessions and naked vulnerability. Brown experienced a traumatic breakup while making *Quaranta,* so he uses "Down Wit It" to reprise a Scarface line from Geto Boys' "Mind Playing Tricks on Me." "I had a woman down with me/But to me, she was down to get me/Helped me out in this shit/Now, I'm realizing that I love her," he raps while admitting that the split was largely a consequence of his cheating and substance abuse. He conjures witty wordplay on "Celibate," as he raps over a beat loop, "I used to sell a bit/But I don't fuck around no more, I'm celibate/Had me trapped in that cell a bit/Locked up with some pimps told me, 'Sell a bitch.'"

Quaranta shows that Brown has lost none of his musical acuity. Memorable moments abound, like "Y.B.P." (acronym for "Young Black Poor"), where he and Bruiser Wolf from his Bruiser Brigade crew rock over SKYWLKR and Kassa Overall's Foster Sylvers loop. He picks apart sociological phenomena with sharp wit. Still, as Brown strives for a break from his party-hearty *XXX* persona, one wonders if the audience — unfairly or not — will view *Quaranta* as a comedown from those gloriously debauched years. Perhaps that's for the best. No matter if his fans embrace this newly restrained alt-rap hero or not, it's better to be alive and underrated than glorified and dead. ®

DOLLY PARTON ROCKS OUT

The country legend takes on the rock & roll canon with a cast of A-list pals By JON DOLAN

Dolly parton is arguably the most beloved living American. Of course, she's a paragon of country music, but her reach goes far beyond Nashville, from the disco-pop sass of "9 to 5" to the soft-rock glory of her classic Kenny Rogers duet, "Islands in the Stream."

Parton's 49th album, *Rockstar,* is her first foray into rock & roll. She got the idea to do a rock covers LP after being inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2022. To make it happen, she's convened an astonishing collection of all-star duet partners: Paul McCartney, Ringo Star, Peter Frampton, and Mick Fleetwood are on board for "Let It Be"; Elton John joins her for "Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me"; her goddaughter Miley Cyrus swings by for "Wrecking Ball." When Parton can't get A-plus-list collaborators, there's an A-lister there to pick up the slack; she wanted Jimmy Page and Robert Plant for "Stairway to Heaven," but when that didn't work out, she called in Lizzo to rock a little Hobbit-bop flute. Mick Jagger had a scheduling conflict, so Pink and Brandi Carlile pick up the slack for a stomp through "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction."

Parton only goes for the biggest, splashiest karaoke-core selections. Her warmth, up-for-anything spirit, and common touch bring almost everything she does endearingly down-to-earth, and she's every bit a vocal match for every heavy hitter who rolls through — whether she's feeling her heartbeat with Steve Perry's on Journey's "Open Arms," or searching for some pie-in-the-sky summit with Chris Stapleton on Bob Seger's "Night Moves." The best moments are gestures of sisterly community, especially ones with fellow travelers from the 1970s. Parton recalls her disco era by hitting the dance floor with Blondie's Debbie Harry for a glide through "Heart of Glass." One of the most moving moments comes when Parton, Emmylou Harris, and Sheryl Crow honor Linda Ronstadt, who has been sidelined from music for health reasons, with a version of her classic "You're No Good."

There are some original songs written for the project, but even when abetted by the likes of Rob Halford or Michael McDonald, the new material struggles to get noticed amid the classic-rock fireworks. One new song people are talking about is "Either Or," with Kid Rock. It's an unfortunate choice given the Kid's track record of Trump-y antics. But poor judgment is as much a part of rock & roll as guitar solos and power ballads, and Parton has folded her own story into rock history with heart and class. ®

Dolly Parton
Rockstar
BIG MACHINE

BREAKING

Katie Von Schleicher's Light Touch

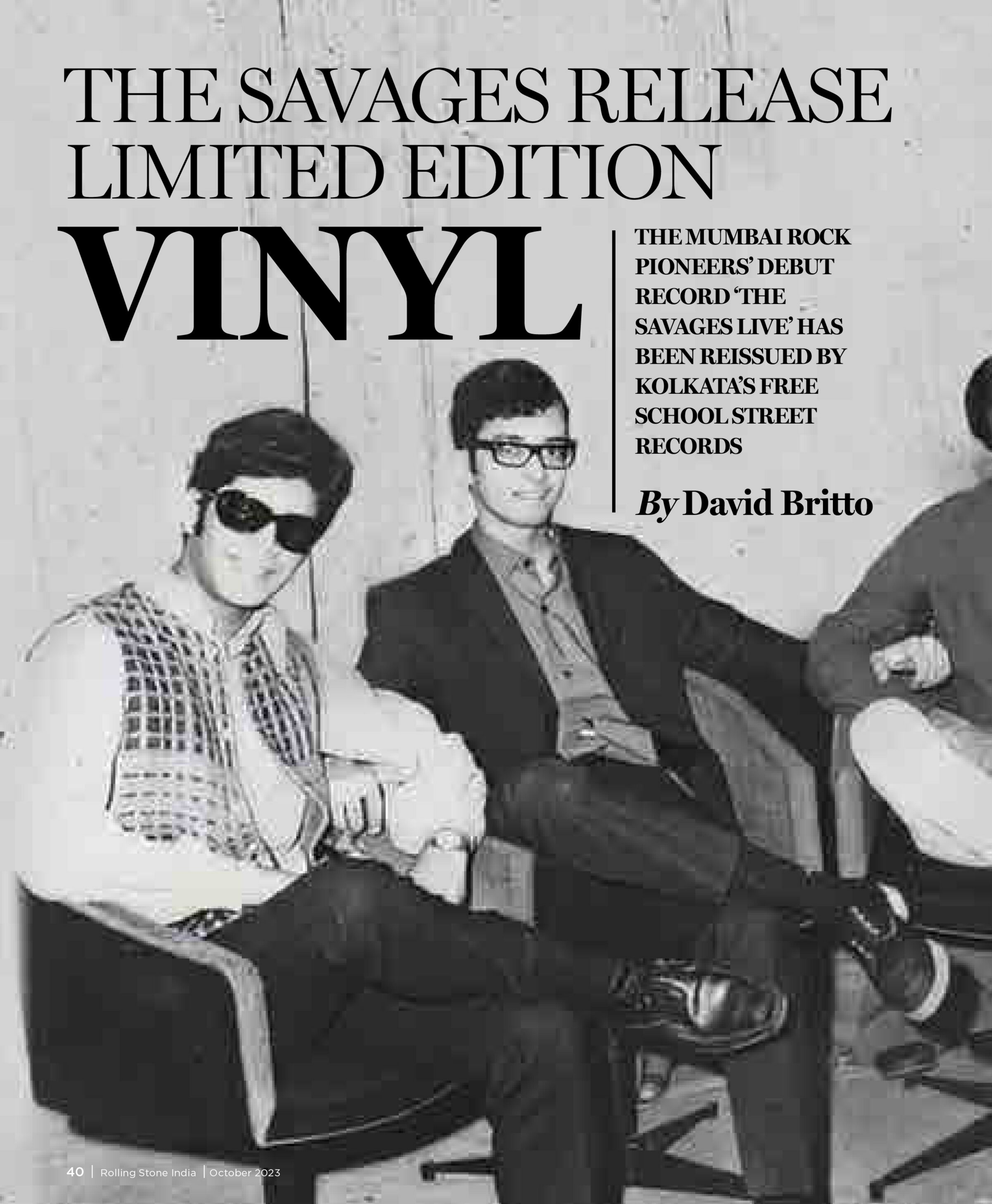
SINGER-SONGWRITER Katie Von Schleicher shows off her sense of humor and sense of history with the title of her great new album, *A Little Touch of Schleicher in the Night* — a reference to Harry Nilsson's 1973 LP, *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*. Like Nilsson, the Brooklyn-based artist mixes easeful melodies, rich orchestrations, and winning irony. "Elixir" follows lyrics about apathy into a "la la la" refrain, and on "Overjoyed," she makes awkward phrases like "I don't want to be critical" go down soft-rock smooth. Even a little touch of Von Schleicher is enough to pick up your mood. JON DOLAN

FROM TOP: VIJAT MOHINDRA; ELEANOR PETRY

THE SAVAGES RELEASE LIMITED EDITION VINYL

THE MUMBAI ROCK PIONEERS' DEBUT RECORD 'THE SAVAGES LIVE' HAS BEEN REISSUED BY KOLKATA'S FREE SCHOOL STREET RECORDS

By **David Britto**

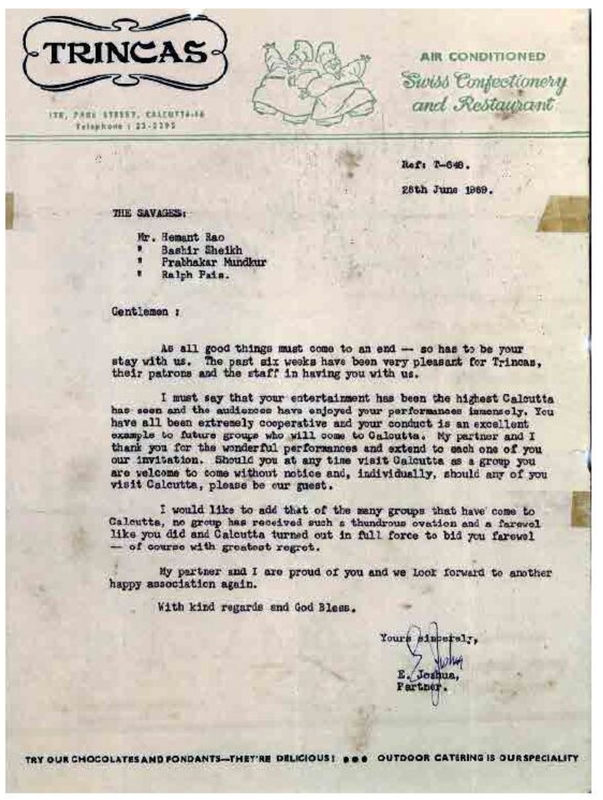


COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

PROMINENT MUMBAI rockers The Savages burst onto the scene in the Sixties, marking a pivotal chapter in the unfolding narrative of Indian rock music. While acknowledging the existence of bands preceding them, often relegated to the realms of cover performances in club gigs, it was the Savages, founded by drummer Bashir Sheikh, who transcended the norm. Not only did they venture into crafting their own compositions but also embarked on a journey that would become synonymous with the evolution of rock in India.

Although the Savages' witnessed plenty of lineup changes, their most prominent one consisted of Sheikh, Ralph Pais (bass), Hemant Rao (guitar), Prabhakar Mundkur (keyboards and vocals) and Russel Pereira (vocals). It was these musicians who cut the band's debut album, *The Savages Live*, which was released via German-British record label Polydor Records in 1971. Now, the band is out with a reissue vinyl of the LP which has been released by Kolkata's Free School Street Records.

In this interview with Mundkur, he talks to us about how the LP came together, working with Free School Street Records for the reissue and the last time the Savages played together. Read below.


TRINCAS

AIR CONDITIONED
Swiss Confectionery and Restaurant

Ref: T-648.

28th June 1969.

THE SAVAGES:

Mr. Hemant Rao
" Bashir Sheikh
" Prabhakar Mundkur
" Ralph Pais.

Gentlemen :

As all good things must come to an end — so has to be your stay with us. The past six weeks have been very pleasant for Trincas, their patrons and the staff in having you with us.

I must say that your entertainment has been the highest Calcutta has seen and the audiences have enjoyed your performances immensely. You have all been extremely cooperative and your conduct is an excellent example to future groups who will come to Calcutta. My partner and I thank you for the wonderful performances and extend to each one of you our invitation. Should you at any time visit Calcutta as a group you are welcome to come without notice and, individually, should any of you visit Calcutta, please be our guest.

I would like to add that of the many groups that have come to Calcutta, no group has received such a thundrous ovation and a farewel like you did and Calcutta turned out in full force to bid you farewel — of course with greatest regret.

My partner and I are proud of you and we look forward to another happy association again.

With kind regards and God Bless.

Yours Sincerely,
E. Joshua,
Partner.

TRY OUR CHOCOLATES AND FONDANTS—THEY'RE DELICIOUS! ●●● OUTDOOR CATERING IS OUR SPECIALITY

What do you remember from putting together the original album that came out in 1971?

What happened was in 1969, the Taj opened a discotheque called the Blow Up. Polydor Records had just come from Germany to India and the managing director of Polydor heard us at the Blow Up. They immediately offered us a recording contract. So, this LP was recorded in 1970, but the record was released in 1971. It was our first LP, so to speak, we had cut two 45 RPM records, so this was a really big break for us because in those days western musicians and Western music was not so popular, and the musicians were looked down upon. We used to get treated badly. Anyway, I think it was quite a landmark for Indian musicians playing Western music to release something as big as an LP in India. I think Usha Uthup was the first to release an album called *Scotch and Soda* in 1969 and then ours was recorded in 1970. It was at least the first three Western music LPs ever recorded in India.

At that time, we recorded the album at Jyoti Studios somewhere in Worli. Polydor wanted it to sound like a live recording, so they mixed some crowd sounds into it, which we were not happy with because it sounded very artificial. The 'live' [element] has been added to it artificially.

How did the reissue of the album come about?

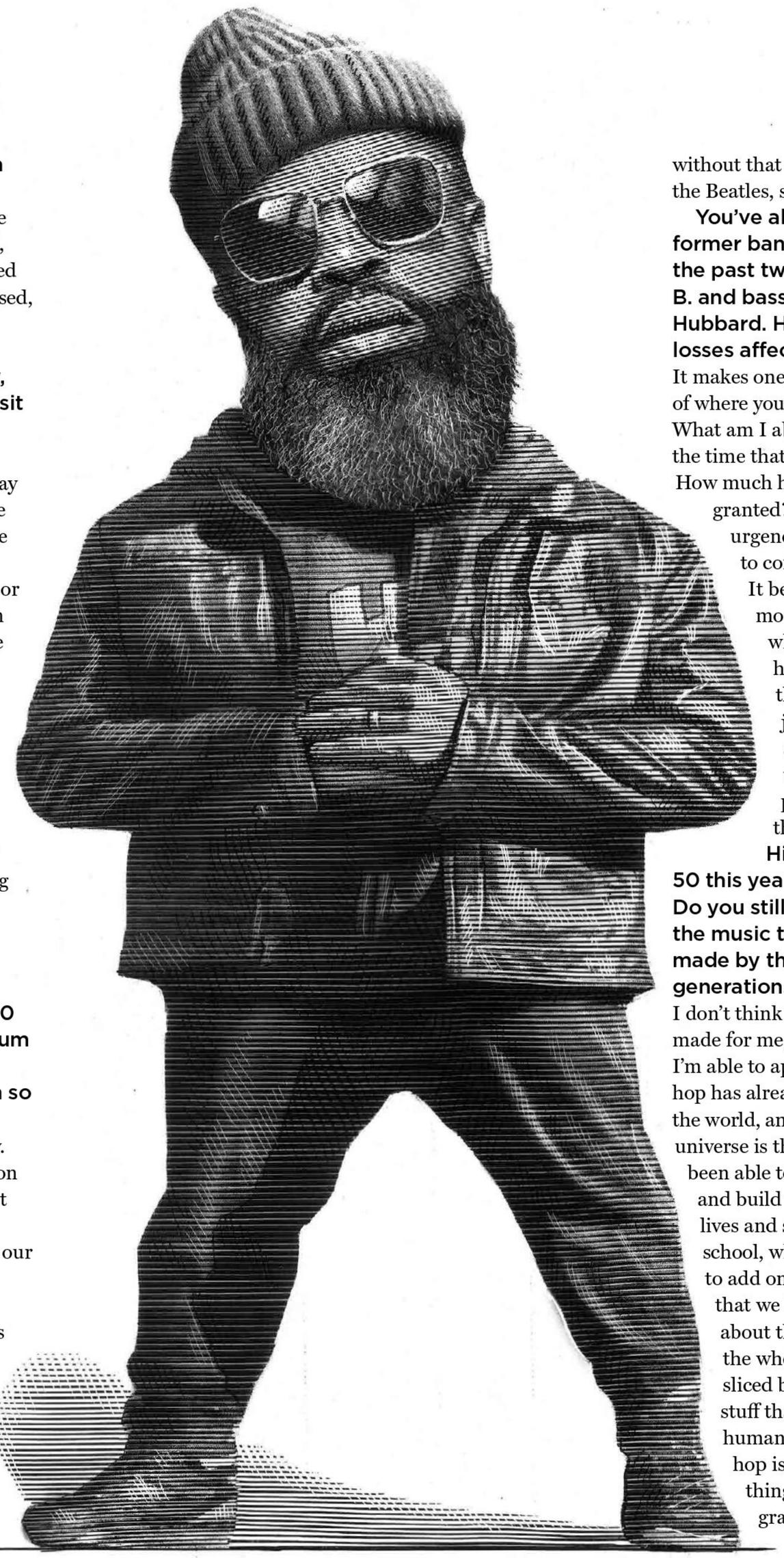
We used to see odd kinds of sales on eBay selling the record for $3000 and some ridiculous amounts. We always just wondered whether this is a joke or if somebody really loves us so much that the record can sell for $3000. Finally, we got a call from Free School Street Records in Kolkata and they said, 'We want to do a reissue.' We couldn't believe it. They said that there's a lot of interest still. We are all in our Seventies now, we can't believe that something we did when we were 16 and 18 would be of any value now. But they were very keen, and they put together something really fantastic. I mean it's much better than the original album, both in terms of sound and they've given us a red cherry vinyl, which makes it look very attractive because the original cover was just red and black. It goes so well with the thing, and it's just so much better than what was done in 1970. So, for us it was a big thrill because in those days we were one of the premier bands in the late Sixties and early Seventies. So, that something like this could actually make a comeback, it's a great moment to celebrate.

Do you recall the last time the Savages played together?

I think it was 2008 when we did a comeback show. It was at Jazz by the Bay in Bombay where we used to play in 1970 in its earlier avatar, which was called Talk of The Town. Long before it became Jazz by the Bay and Pizza by the Bay. If you go to the West, there are many Talk of The Towns, especially in the U.S., so it was like a borrowed concept, but we used to play every night there for a couple of months. So, we thought that was a good venue for us to go back and do a live show. It was totally sold out. There was no place to stand, people were going to the Ambassador to have a pee because the loos were full. We had a huge show there and what we did was we called Joe Alvarez, who used to be in the band and we Remo Fernandes, who also used to be in the band between 1970 and 72' before he went back to Goa. Then Bashir Sheikh who was always there, me, Hemanth Rao came from Dubai and Ralph Pais was on bass. We also had some very dear musical friends like Loy Mendonsa and Leslee Lewis who joined us too. Basically, a kind of nostalgic trip with the Savages and their musician friends. ®

Black Thought

The Roots MC on his new memoir, artistic growth, and loss



In your new memoir, you write that you were "an introverted kid." Would you still describe yourself that way now?
Yes, definitely. Sometimes to a fault. It's a gift and a curse. Through that introversion and in that pause, I'm able to answer the call: That's where the ideation takes place, and that's where the imagination kicks in. If I always had that outside stimulus of interacting with actual people, I don't know that I would be as deep a thinker or as in tune with myself as I am. But the opposite side of the coin is the social expense.

> *'The Upcycled Self' is out now.*

People might assume that someone who's as comfortable on the mic as you would love talking to people.
One would think that. I'm not comfortable being in front of people or sharing myself with the world, but I understand the necessity of it. It's a means to an end.

You just turned 50. How did you celebrate?
I went away for almost a week, my wife and I. I can't remember the last time we got away for that extended period of time. We went to Mexico. It was a great way to end a summer of heavy touring, and also the 140-odd days of uncertainty of the writers' and actors' strikes. And then I came back.

On your most recent solo album, *Glorious Game,* you sound like a more mature artist.
Absolutely. Different, more mature, more experienced, wiser. Probably a little jaded and more of a realist. Bruised, battered, scarred.

When you perform older Roots songs now, how does it feel to revisit that part of your life?
Songs that we've been performing for the mainstay of our career have been the more general joints. People may think that "You Got Me" or "Silent Treatment" or "The Hypnotic" came from real experiences. But those were essentially audio screenplays, and I just was able to weave those stories in a way that made it relatable.... I don't really have that personal connection that people might think I do. For me, it's just a song I wrote when I was 18, 19, 20 years old. It's not like it's gut-wrenching for me.

Next year will mark 10 years since the last album you released with the Roots. Why has it been so long?
It feels a little unnecessary. There may be some aversion associated with putting out music in the absence of Richard Nichols, who was our longtime manager. [*Note: Nichols died of leukemia in 2014.*] There's lots of music. We could put out an album tomorrow if we needed to. The reason we haven't has to be some anxiety. There's a blockage associated with putting out music without that fifth member of the Beatles, so to speak.

You've also lost two former bandmates in the past two years, Malik B. and bassist Leonard Hubbard. How have those losses affected you?
It makes one more conscious of where you are in life. What am I able to do with the time that I have left? How much have I taken for granted? It's a different urgency to create and to continue to evolve. It becomes that much more important when you realize how many people that began the journey with you aren't going to be there with you physically in the end.

Hip-hop turned 50 this year, like you. Do you still connect to the music that's being made by the younger generations?
I don't think that it's being made for me, so to speak, but I'm able to appreciate it. Hip-hop has already taken over the world, and I think the universe is the limit. We've all been able to feed ourselves and build these beautiful lives and send our kids to school, while continuing to add on to this thing that we love. You talk about the invention of the wheel and shit like sliced bread and fire — stuff that revolutionized humanity — I think hip-hop is one of those things. I'm just super grateful. SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

ILLUSTRATION BY **Mark Summers**